



MOUNTAIN PREACHER STORIES

Laughter Among the Trumpets

Ben C. Fisher

With a preface by Sally Fisher

Afterword by Roger G. Branch

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by Ben C. Fisher



The Appalachian Consortium was a non-profit educational organization composed of institutions and agencies located in Southern Appalachia. From 1973 to 2004, its members published pioneering works in Appalachian studies documenting the history and cultural heritage of the region. The Appalachian Consortium Press was the first publisher devoted solely to the region and many of the works it published remain seminal in the field to this day.

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To our sons
David and Hugh

Appalachian Consortium Press



The Appalachian Consortium is a non-profit educational organization comprised of institutions and agencies located in the Southern Highlands. Our members are volunteers who plan and execute projects which serve 156 mountain counties in seven states. Among our goals are:

- Preserving the cultural heritage of Southern Appalachia
- Protecting the mountain environment
- Publishing manuscripts about the region
- Improving educational opportunities for area students and teachers
- Conducting scientific, social, and economic research
- Promoting a positive image of Appalachia
- Encouraging regional cooperation

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PREFACE

My husband, Ben Fisher, had collected these mountain stories for many years, and used them often as illustrations in his speeches and in his writing. In sessions of the executive committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, occasionally when a controversial issue had caused stress and frayed patience, I have heard a motion to "set aside five minutes for Ben Fisher to tell a story."

"Second the motion!"

He would have to get to his feet immediately and try to tell the right story for that moment. Often he managed to make a point, obliquely and with a disarming smile, because he knew "how to drive a nail without busting the plank."

He had always meant to make a book of these stories, "but not," he said, "until I'm finished with them myself."

Now, alas! he is finished with them. After he died in November, 1985, I worked first on his other nearly completed manuscript, *The Idea of a Christian University in Today's World*, and have only now been able to publish the mountain stories. A few were on tape, a number had been transcribed in rough draft, and some have been contributed by folk who carried them in loving memory.

The subtitle of this book, *Laughter Among the Trumpets*, comes from Job 39:25 (King James version: "He saith among the trumpets, Ha ha"). This verse became the headline on a feature article by Jay Jenkins some years ago, pointing out how Ben used humor to deflate pomposity or to soften stridence.

It is impossible, of course, to convey on paper the timing, or the reminiscent laughter in the voice of the teller; but the book is conversational in tone. A few stories on tape were interspersed with comments which I have left in place because they provide background settings. Some of the old way of life is vanishing; there may come a day when such description will be a valuable record of "the way we were."

Many of the stories have been told in Switzerland, in New England, in Hong Kong, in Wales, in Japan, in Australia. Ben received one attractive offer to videotape them, but the proposal was for him to dress in overalls and act the part of a country bumpkin. This he refused to do, because to him the chief appeal of these tales is not their provincial nature but their universality. The characters may never have been out of their home counties, but in telling about them, Ben had found the secret of drawing people together with a laugh at human foibles that know no cultural boundaries. Drawing people together, in the name of the Lord, was a special part of his ministry.

Sally Fisher

INTRODUCTION

During the past forty years, I have collected stories illustrating the humor of the Southern highlander. Appalachia, especially that part of it in western North Carolina, was heavily populated with immigrants from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Some were folk of German origin. They brought with them not only their rugged individualism and their determination to work and to wrest homes out of the wilderness; they brought also a sense of humor and a dignity which have always been characteristic of a sturdy yeoman people.

Their humor has certain consistencies which are identifiable. First of all, mountain humor, like all folk humor, typically arises out of a life situation. Occasionally there will be an imaginative "tall story," but usually the tale relates something that happened, not something just dreamed up. Partly for this reason it is frequently told in the first person. A good storyteller will often add some embroidery, but he is essentially describing a happening that needs no adornment. Often one could scarcely imagine anything as funny as what actually occurred.

Moreover, most mountain preachers and many of the old-time mountaineers had a real talent for telling stories. This is the reason that when these stories are written, they are not nearly so funny as when they are told or put on video-tape. The power is somewhat in the timing.

A third characteristic of the wit of the mountaineer is that it is never meant to hurt anybody — it is not sharp, or barbed, or mean, or ugly — and when possible, a man tells the story on himself. (This is another reason for the frequency of the first person.) This kind of satire bears comparison with that of the Romans — for that matter, all the way back through history mankind has been laughing at basically the same life situations. But mountain satire laughs at them gently. In Roman times, some very bitter satire was written by Juvenal, who could not make enough harsh, biting remarks about enough people. There was another type of Roman satire written by the gentle poet Horace, who made people laugh and feel good. Mountain humor

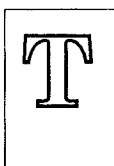
is essentially Horatian: light-hearted and kind, it never has a barb in it, never lacerates, never seeks to embarrass or humiliate. Some of it is not so funny as it is poignant. It illustrates a great warm-heartedness that characterizes mountain folk.

Another noticeable feature of mountain wit is that it is clean. There may be an occasional *hell* or *damn*, but beyond that — and that very infrequently — these stories can be told anywhere: in church or in any company. This is not to say that the mountaineer didn't have some barnyard jokes. He had plenty of those, but he had the good sense and good taste to know that the place to tell those was in the barnyard.

A final characteristic of mountain stories is that most of them are didactic. There is almost always an implied lesson to be learned, and for this reason mountain preachers have used as sermon illustrations many of the stories which follow. In a way, this book should be considered my tribute to the old-time mountain preacher. He was a man of God. He knew how to preach the Word, he loved his people, he shepherded his flock, and he needed — believe me — a sense of humor in those rough mountains and in those times.

Ben C. Fisher

THE STRIKING CLOCK

he story is told of the little mountain congregation that inherited a very beautiful banjo clock, which they immediately installed in the back of the church. They were all so proud of the beautiful set of chimes that they were encouraged to form the habit of coming early enough to hear them, thus starting the morning service promptly at the eleven o'clock hour, and the evening service at eight.

One Sunday evening when the congregation had gathered expectantly and were awaiting the beautiful chimes, the clock ran away, striking forty-nine times. One of the old mountaineers stood up and said, "Come on, old woman, let's get out of here. It's time to go home. This is the latest it's ever been."

COINING A WORD

The old-time mountain preacher could, many times, be eloquent. His language was often colorful, and sometimes when he was short of a word, he simply manufactured one that said more than conventional English.

One Sunday morning Uncle Jethro was preaching — as they say in the mountains — "in a weaving way," and he was almost completely carried away by the occasion. He had a large congregation and a good sermon, and the amens had been frequent. It was one of those beautiful spring mornings with fleecy clouds floating in the air, and soft breezes coming through the window. The crops were up, the pastures were green, and the cattle could be seen on the hills. Uncle Jethro looked down the aisle and out through the open door to the beautiful valley below, and he said,

"Folks, I want you to realize that the whole earth belongs to the Lord. It's all his; it's his, brethren, from horizon to hosettin."

WAGON WHEEL STARS

This story comes from southern Appalachia. It was told to me by my dear friend John Steely, a colleague at Southeastern Seminary and a friend of more than twenty-five years.

It seems that a young preacher had been away to college and had taken a course in astronomy. He was overcome with the transcendental distances, the hugeness of the universe, the black holes, the galaxies, and the enormous size of the stars. He had a somewhat guilty feeling that he had made God too small. He incorporated all of this into a sermon to his mountain congregation, and told them that Jupiter is a planet so big that the earth could be placed inside it several times.

When the service was over, the mountain boys were outside talking. One old deacon said to another, "Did you hear that?"

"Yes," he said, "I did."

"Well, what do you think about it?"

He said, "I don't think a thing about it. You can just look up there — look at all them stars up there. You can tell that if they was as big as wagon wheels, they'd lap."

MAKING A DARNING BALL

This is a human interest story that actually happened in a little community over near Franklin, not far from Sylva.

A young girl became the first from her community to attend college. She had gone all the way down to Greensboro, North

Carolina, and majored in home economics. When she came back, the home demonstration club invited her to speak. These good mountain women were very proud of their college graduate, but they had requested her to talk about something practical.

She decided that she would teach them how to make a darning ball by taking the white and the yolk out of an egg, then pouring the eggshell full of plaster of Paris, allowing it to harden, and then breaking the eggshell off. The hardened plaster can be shellacked or varnished, and it does make an excellent darning ball. It fits very nicely into the toe or heel of a sock.

She appeared at the appointed hour, and she had some pots and pans and an egg on the table in front of her, and she allowed her pride in having been to college to be reflected in her choice of words. She picked up the egg and said to those good mountain ladies: "You will observe that the object which I hold in my hand is elliptical in shape. By inducing a small opening in both the anterior and posterior ends of this elliptical object, and by exhaling gently through it, I force the contents into a saucepan."

One good old mountain woman piped up, "Friends, ain't a college education wonderful? I always just poked a hole in each end and blowed 'er in a cup."

FRESH AIR

The father of one of my boyhood chums had been killed in an accident, leaving this boy (whom I will call Henry), his widowed mother, and his older brother. My grandfather had a large, squared-log house which he allowed the family to use rent-free. It was carefully built and chinked. Along the north side was a lean-to built out of boards, with a sloping roof. There was a large fireplace at one end of the main cabin and a big Foster range at the other. This was where the family lived. They ate at a big oilcloth-topped table, and they slept in the large room, where there were four big beds, each with a straw tick and a featherbed.

Henry's mother was a wonderful cook, and I used to like to go there and spend the night and eat, particularly when she would bake potatoes in the ashes behind the backlog. Anyone who has never eaten potatoes baked in this fashion doesn't know what he has missed. There is simply nothing like the flavor of a potato baked "mealy done" in good hickory ashes.

On several occasions I spent the night there, and when the wind was high, I could see the hooked rug waving a bit, because the cabin sat a little way off the ground. If it happened to be snowing, a "skiff" of snow would drift in, in a narrow line along the cracks.

Henry and I went to a little mountain school together. First, second, and third grades were together in one room, and fourth, fifth, and sixth in another. Of course we were able to hear it all, and we learned a lot.

About this time a hygiene course had been introduced in the third grade of the public schools. Our teacher went to great lengths to teach us good health rules. One of the habits she stressed was that in order to be healthy, we needed to get plenty of good fresh air. Each night we were supposed to lower our window two inches from the top and raise it two inches from the bottom so that the air would circulate freely.

After she had explained this procedure several times, we came into our little schoolroom one morning, and after she had called the roll, she began to inquire what each had done about adjusting the window. When she came to Henry, she said, "Henry, did you lower your bedroom window two inches from the top last night, and raise it two inches from the bottom?"

Henry looked at her a moment and answered, "Teacher, just to tell you the honest truth, fresh air ain't our problem."

THE SALESMAN

A mountain boy had grown a little tired of the back-breaking work on his rocky little mountain farm, so he decided he'd go into the city and get himself a job to earn some money. Because he had done a lot of fishing and hunting, he determined that what he'd like to do would be to clerk in a sporting goods store. So he went into the store and applied to the manager for a job. The manager observed that the mountaineer wasn't dressed very well, and his English wasn't the best, so the manager was trying to let the boy down gently. But the boy said, "Friend, all I want is a chance for one day. It won't cost you one thing. If I don't sell you a lot of stuff this first day, it won't cost you anything. I need the job. How about letting me try?"

The store manager thought, "Well, what have I got to lose?" Along about 4:30 he started checking up, and he found out that the old boy had sold one man \$3600 worth of equipment. The manager was just fascinated. So he called the mountaineer in and said, "Friend, have you actually sold \$3600 worth of equipment to one man?"

He said, "Yes, sir, I did."

The manager said, "How in the world did you do it?"

The boy said, "Friend, it all started with some fishhooks. He bought some fishhooks, and I said, 'How about your fishing pole? We've got a special here: a nice rod and reel. The fishhooks are not going to do you any good unless you've got a good rod and reel,' so I sold him the rod and reel.

"Then I said, 'Where are you going to catch these fish?"

" 'Well,' he said, 'I guess I'll stand on the bank,' and I said, 'Now, friend, you're not going to catch any fish just standing on the bank. What you need is a good boat. If you've got a good boat, you can get out there where the fish are.'

"He said, 'All right,' so I sold him the boat.

"Then I said, 'When you get into this boat, how are you going to move it along?' "

“ ‘Well,’ the man said, ‘I guess I’ll paddle it or pole it.’

“I said to him, ‘Now, friend, you’re not going to catch any fish paddling or poling. Everybody else will be there first. What you need is a motor.’ So I sold him a motor to go on the boat. He bought that, and I said, ‘Now, can you swim?’

“He said, ‘Well, some.’

“I said, ‘You oughtn’t to be out there without some life preservers. In the first place, it’s not legal.’ So I sold him some life preservers.

“So,” the mountaineer said, “it all added up to a little more than \$3600.”

The store manager was just amazed. He said, “Friend, do you mean to tell me that a man came in here and asked to buy some fishhooks, and you sold him \$3600 worth of fishing equipment?”

“No, sir, that’s not exactly right. I didn’t say the man came in here and asked to buy fishhooks. What he said was that he had a headache and wanted to buy two aspirins, so that’s when I said, ‘Man, you need to go fishing.’”

He got the job.

SUPER-SALESMAN

Some years ago a man, after having been away for several years, returned to western North Carolina to revisit the scenes of his childhood: the old home place and the little mountain cemetery. It was a hot July day. As he drove along he got hotter and hotter, and he began to think about those delicious Nehis that he used to drink when he was a boy. Suddenly he saw in the distance what he was sure was an old-time country store. It was, and he pulled off the road.

The sun had been very bright. He parked his car, and when

he went into the cool shadows of the old store building, he was temporarily almost blind from the light of the sun. But as his eyes began to adjust to the dark interior, he was amazed to see boxes of salt and cans of salt and sacks of salt stacked on the counter and on the floor and almost everywhere else.

He stood around waiting a few minutes. No one appeared. Finally, when he heard a movement in the back of the store, he went on through to the part which was storeroom and feedroom. An old man was carefully cranking out a canful of kerosene from an old-fashioned hand-cranked tank. As he watched, he noticed also that there were more boxes of salt, sacks of salt, and cans of salt back in this storeroom. He said to the old man, "Do you own this store?"

"Yes, I do," he replied.

"Well," he said, "friend, you must sell a lot of salt."

The old man thoughtfully scratched his chin and said, "No, sir, but there was a fella through here the other day who sure sells a lot of salt."

SQUIRREL GRAVY

A mountain preacher who was very, very strict with his family came home one Sunday afternoon and learned that his oldest boy had taken a shotgun out that afternoon and killed seven or eight big fat squirrels. The boy had dressed them out and brought them in, and his mother had parboiled them and fried them a golden brown, and was getting ready to serve them for supper. The preacher was wroth. He told the whole family in no uncertain terms how he felt about that violation of the Sabbath.

The time came when they all got ready to sit down at the supper table before a platter of those rich brown squirrels. The good woman had made a great big bowlful of good, brown gravy

and some hot buttermilk biscuits. The aroma of the coffee and gravy was floating around. The family sat down after the blessing, and the preacher said, "Just like I said, and I want to tell you again, young man, you had no business going out hunting on Sunday. That's a sin. It's shameful, and I'm surprised that you'd do it. There isn't anything in the world that would make me touch one mouthful of those squirrels — but I *will* take a little of the gravy."

THE THREE GIFTS

Three young people, two brothers and a sister, were very proficient with the guitar, the banjo, and the fiddle. They went to Nashville to the Grand Ole Opry and did so well there that they were invited to play at the White House. The music company sent them on out to Hollywood, where they made some hit records and soon became very wealthy. However, they were so busy making money and performing that they neglected their mother, whom they loved very dearly.

It soon became apparent that they would not be able to get home for Christmas, and they felt guilty about it, so they decided that each would do something unusually nice in the way of a Christmas present. The girl went out and bought her mother a string of genuine matched pearls. The older brother bought a beautiful mink stole. The younger brother wanted to do something really special, so he went to a pet shop and spent five hundred dollars for a myna bird, and another five hundred dollars getting a fellow musician to teach this bird to sing his mother's favorite hymn. They met and were all quite pleased with themselves, and made arrangements to have these presents sent to the mother special delivery so that she would have them before Christmas.

Christmas came and went, and since they hadn't heard from their mother, they became a little concerned, so the younger son called his mother. She said, "Oh son, I'm just so glad to hear from

you. I haven't been too well, but I've been meaning to write. I hope you're well, and I'm sorry you didn't get home for Christmas."

The boy said, "Mom, did you get our presents?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, what did you think about sister's pearls?"

She said, "Son, they're the prettiest things I have ever seen in my life. I'm almost afraid to wear them — I'm so afraid I'll break the string and lose some of them. Once in awhile I wear them to church, but mostly I keep them wrapped up in a bureau drawer, and I open the box and look at them sometimes."

"Well," he said, "did you get the mink stole that brother sent?"

"Oh," she said, "it's just so warm, and I wear it to church every Sunday. It's the prettiest thing, might' nigh, I ever had. The people at church just brag on it."

Then the younger son paused and said, "Well, Mom, did you get the myna bird?"

"Yes, I did, son," she replied. "Thank you so much. It was delicious."

THE THREE-MINUTE EGG

When I was serving as administrative assistant to the president of Southeastern Seminary, it was customary for us to go over to Nashville, Tennessee, in February for the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention at which the institutional budgets were approved. On this trip there were Stealey, Binkley, Sandusky, Newman,* and I. In those days, before Baptists became prosperous, we didn't have

*Dr. Sydnor L. Stealey, president of the seminary at that time; Dr. Olin T. Binkley, dean; Dr. Fred Sandusky, registrar; and Dr. Stewart A. Newman, professor of theology. — Ed.

the money to fly over, so we had to pack five people into a car and make a two-day trip. We'd drive to Asheville one day and then on into Nashville the next. Because they gave us special rates, we usually stayed at the Mountaineer Hotel, near Beaucatcher Tunnel. The motel didn't have a restaurant, so we used to go up to Buck's, just a few doors above, where we liked to eat breakfast because of the homemade biscuits and baked apples.

On this particular morning, we sat at a round table, and because I was on a diet, I ordered dry toast and a three-minute egg. The little waitress brought the egg, and I broke it, and it was raw, so I sent it back. She brought another egg, and it was the same way, and I sent it back. She brought the third egg, and it wasn't any better, but I ate it as best I could.

But I didn't like it. And, of course, when I got home and told my wife about it, I found that she had been cooking my three-minute egg four minutes.

Just one year from that day, almost to the day, we were back on our way to Nashville — same crowd. We went up to Buck's and sat down at that round table. The same little waitress came up (I didn't recognize her at the time), stood there, and stared at me for a long time. With a twinkle in her eyes she said, "Okay, Grumpy, let's get started on those eggs."

STEALING CHICKENS

This story originated not in my native state but in Arkansas. I heard it first from a well-known Congressman who was one of the greatest friends that private higher education has ever had, particularly in keeping up appropriations for student scholarships.

Some years ago, a young man had completed reading law and had passed the bar exam. He moved into a small town and hung out his shingle. Almost two weeks went by, and not a single client darkened his door. Then one day he looked up, and coming

through the door was a lanky mountaineer with about two days' growth of beard. One of the "galluses" of his overalls was held up with a thorn, which had replaced the missing button. (The Congressman explained that the thorn was significant. The middle class, he said, used a nail for this purpose, but the poor used thorns. This boy didn't have the money for a nail.)

Pausing a minute, the newcomer said, "Friend, are you a lawyer?"

The young man replied, "Yes, I am."

"Well, I need help. I've been indicted. Can you help me?"

The young lawyer said, "That's what I'm here for. Sit down, and tell me what your problem is."

The mountaineer paused, looked at the floor, pulled his earlobe, scratched his cheek, shifted his cud of tobacco from one side to the other, and said, "Well, I'll tell you, it's like this: they swore out a warrant, and I've got to stand trial. I'm out on bond. I've been arrested for stealing chickens."

"Well," the lawyer said, "that's a fairly serious charge. If I'm going to help you, you've got to tell me the complete truth. Now, you understand that whatever you tell me is privileged information. Do you know what privileged information is?"

The mountaineer said, "No, sir, I don't."

"That simply means," said the lawyer, "that anything you tell me, good or bad, can't be used in court against you. They can't compel me ever to tell it to anyone or to testify against you. It's absolutely confidential." When there was no reply, the lawyer continued, "Now, the first thing I want to know is this: did you really steal those chickens?"

The old mountain boy hesitated a minute, looked at the floor, looked at the ceiling, then looked out the window, and finally said, "Well, friend, to tell you the truth, you've put your finger on the weakest point in my whole case."

YOUNG GROUNDHOGS

Dr. George Capps passed on to me the story which follows.

It seems that for a good many years the people in a small mountain community had gone to their preacher to ask him when it would be all right to plant their gardens. No one could remember when he had failed to give them good advice.

One spring in recent years, they went again and asked the old preacher about planting-time. He studied a minute and said, "Well, it's going to be a little cool, and it's going to be a little damp, but it's going to be a good garden year, so you go ahead and plant your seed. Everything will be fine."

So they went ahead and planted every seed on the mountain. The weather warmed up, and in about two weeks every seed came up. Then came a hard freeze, which burned everything off to the ground. People were really appalled.

One of the deacons went back and said, "Preacher, our congregation is terribly upset. For as long as anybody can remember, you've been telling us when to plant the gardens, and you've never failed. We want to know two things: how have you been able to do this all these years, and what happened this spring?"

The old preacher shook his head. "Well," he said, "friend, you know, I'm nearly ninety years old, and all these years, I've been watching the groundhogs, but, friend, these *young* groundhogs are somethin' else."

NOT FIT FOR A DOG

A young preacher who had been ordained to the gospel ministry only a short time before was very much excited when he received one of his first opportunities to preach. He had been invited to come to a small "quarter-time" mountain church, located in a rather isolated area of the county. He rose early, put on his best suit, picked up his Bible and notes, got into his car,

and checked his directions. In his eagerness and anticipation he arrived at the church about an hour before preaching time.

As he started into the church, there was an old hound-dog stretched full-length in front of the door. He had to step over the dog, and he went on into the church, whereupon he discovered he'd forgotten his Bible. When he came back, the old hound was still there, and wouldn't move. He stepped over the dog again, went back to the car, and decided that while he was there, he would just sit out in the cool air and review his sermon.

The time got away, and people began to gather, so he thought he had better go on into the church. He got his Bible and his notes and started back, and this time the old hound-dog rose up just as he got to the threshold. The young preacher tripped, and fell his full length down the aisle. He got up very angry, and rushed back and kicked that dog in the ribs. The old hound went howling down around the side of the mountain.

The young man had started back into the church when someone tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Friend, I want to tell you something. You've made a terrible mistake. I guess you're the preacher, and I think you ought to know that the dog you kicked belongs to the chairman of the board of deacons of this church. That man's got eleven children, and he thinks as much of that dog as he does of any young'un he's got, and I just thought you ought to know it."

"Well," the young preacher said, "after the service I'll try to make it right."

Immediately following the service, the young man rushed up to the deacon and said, "I want to apologize. I lost my temper and I did an unchristian thing. I'm sorry I kicked your dog, and I want you to forgive me."

The old mountaineer looked at the young preacher for a long time without changing his expression. Finally he said, "Now, son, don't let that worry you. I'm glad you kicked that dog. I wouldn't have had him hear that sermon for fifty dollars."

MULE TROUBLE

A well-known and popular local mountain politician once lost a very close election. His friends were all moaning and groaning. He was down at the post office one morning to get his mail, and somebody came up and said, "Aw, Henry, you must feel terrible."

He said, "Yes, I do. Reminds me of the fellow that was out one day in the pasture, trying to hem up a young mule in the fence corner and catch him. The mule turned and kicked him in the head and, as he said, 'busted his head wide open.' He was rushed to the doctor, crying, 'Oh doctor, please, please don't let me die. Do anything, but don't let me die! Please save me.'"

"The doctor said, 'You're hurt pretty bad. I'll do the best I can. You afraid to die?'"

"'Oh no,' the man said, 'it's not that. It's just the thought of being kicked to death by a jackass that bothers me.'"

BRAYING MULE

This is one of the favorite mountain preacher stories, and has basis in fact. I got this tale from Phil Elliott, late President of Gardner-Webb College, and for many years himself a mountain preacher when he was a young man.

Phil Elliott had gone to Robbins, North Carolina, to be pastor, and while he was there, he invited Brother Thad Dietz, a greatly beloved mountain pastor known as the Prophet of the Cowees, to come and lead the revival meeting. Brother Dietz had learned to read mostly from the King James version of the Bible, and while he was not college-educated, he knew the great Biblical themes, and could preach them, Genesis to Revelation, sometimes in almost pure Elizabethan English. He had a marvelous sense of humor. He was to do the preaching, and Brother Will Cook was to lead the singing. Will was another great

mountain preacher [along with G. N. (Napoleon) Cowan — I believe they were the first two Jackson County preachers ever to attend college; both were Wake Forest College graduates].

The meeting started, and Brother Dietz was preaching, and the response was good. As they went back one night to the hotel, Brother Dietz said to Pastor Phil Elliott, "You know, I've been watching Will, and Will wants to preach so bad he can taste it. Would you mind if we let him preach on Saturday night?"

A little later, Brother Dietz said to Will, "My throat's a little scratchy. Will, reckon you could preach on Saturday night?" Brother Dietz said later that Will rose to that just like a mountain trout to a grasshopper.

In the meantime, Phil and Thad made an agreement that no matter how good a sermon Will preached Saturday night, they weren't going to say anything about it.

Saturday night came, and Will dusted off his best sermon, and as they say in the mountains, he "preached a big un." However, there was one brief interruption. Not everyone back in the mountains had a car or a truck. Some brought their families to the revival meeting in a wagon, with straight chairs and straw in it. One farmer had hitched his team too close to the church, and about halfway through the sermon one of the mules started to bray. The farmer had to get up and go out and move his team out of earshot, and then come back and take his seat again in the congregation. But there was a good response to the invitation after the sermon: people joined the church by letter and profession of faith. Three or four young people came for baptism.

The next morning, all three men were having breakfast at the hotel—ham and eggs. Will would work up to the sermon, but neither Phil nor Thad would say a word about it. Finally, Will couldn't stand it any longer, and he said, "Brother Dietz, I want you to tell me something: that mule braying last night—did that bother the congregation?"

Phil said Brother Thad just kept sawing away at his ham

and looked up over his glasses and said, "Now, Will, which one was that?"

PANTHER TRACKS

Years ago, when my mother was just a child, she and her dear friend Vera decided to enliven the little Webster schoolhouse. They had found a stuffed panther paw (panthers were called "painters" in the mountains). They used the paw to make some authentic-looking footprints in the moist earth near the school well. At recess, they set up pretended howls of fright, and when they were sure of everyone's attention, they pointed out the pawprints.

The response was so much more dramatic than they had anticipated that they dared not tell about the prank until after they were grown. School was dismissed, and the men of the community organized a posse, took their dogs, and tracked that painter all the way to the top of Gribble Mountain, where they said it got away.

THE BANTY ROOSTER

This story has its setting in Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

Our two small boys received one Christmas week a beautiful bantam rooster and five little "banty" hens. These were gifts from Dr. Robert Allen Dyer and his wife, Mary. Dr. Dyer, later dean at Wake Forest University, was then professor of psychology and director of guidance at Gardner-Webb College.

We were glad to get the banties. The boys enjoyed them as pets, and the hens supplied eggs for a long time. Finally, the only survivor was the little banty rooster.

In order to keep the chickens, I had built a lot for them in the

back yard. The boy next door had a big game chicken, and the two roosters would run along opposite sides of the fence, ruffling up their feathers and pecking and generally pretending to fight.

One day while I was sitting out on the back porch, the game rooster backed off, flew over the fence, attacked the little banty rooster, and was just about to kill him. I walked over and picked up a little piece of pine limb and hit the game rooster across the head just hard enough to flatten him out momentarily. He jumped up, staggered, shook himself, got airborne again, and retreated across the fence from what he evidently thought was an attack by the banty.

The banty must have thought also that he had been the victor, because he got up on a little pine stump and tried to crow, but he was so tired that he fell off backwards.

Apparently neither of them realized that there had been an unseen hand.

HEALTHY HOGS

Pork was very important in the early days, all over the South but particularly in the mountains, not only because it provided the household with a ready source of protein and fat, but also because it could be so easily preserved. Although my grandfather told about curing beef, and smoking beef hams, and making beef sausage, I never saw any of this in the smokehouse in my day. It was generally pork that was the family's source of meat for the entire winter. It was used for seasoning-meat, of course; it appeared on the table as we use breakfast bacon; and the cured ham was served on special occasions, particularly on Sunday. Sausage, seasoned with home-grown pepper and sage — and salt, of course — was sometimes canned and sometimes just put into a great stone crock and covered with hot grease. Through the cold weather it would keep very well and served as a rich source of nourishment for the mountain family.

Along about July or August, pork fat tended to turn and the meat got strong and became too rancid for food, but the fat still was not wasted. It was put into a washpot, along with either a "storebought" lye or a home-made variety. (Most mountain people had a lye-hopper, which was a wooden bin. Into it they put hickory and oak ashes, and either let it sit out in the rain, or poured water over it. The result was a strong brown lye that would take the meat off your fingers if you weren't careful.) The mixture of pork fat and lye was cooked in the iron pot until it was thick, then poured into pans, cut into squares, and used for soap, especially for washing clothes.

All this is to say that the hogs which were raised so carefully were a vital part of the family's resources.

This story, like many of the mountain tales, has to do with the mountaineer and new-fangled notions about farming and health.

A new county agent, who was working with the county health officer, was driving along one day when he saw perched on the mountainside, as if on stilts, a cabin with a long trough that ran from the back porch down to a hog-pen which was only about twenty-five or thirty feet away from a corner of the kitchen. There were several hogs in the pen. The mountaineer was getting ready to have some winter meat.

The agent called him out and said, "Friend, I hate to mention this to you, but you've got your hog-pen too close to your back door and your well. You're going to have to move that hog-lot. This is the most unhealthy thing I've ever seen, and something must be done about it right away."

The mountaineer said, "I sure don't understand that. I ain't lost a hog in forty years."

THE BEEHIVE

This story is an excellent illustration of mountain humor arising out of a situation.

It so happened that on a Saturday just before a revival, Aunt Sarah discovered that she was low on honey. She said to Uncle Dave, "Now, Dave, I want you and the boys to rob the bee gums and bring me some honey because you have put it off and put it off, and I will need it tomorrow."

Uncle Dave said that he reckoned he would do it, and he told the boys — two boys, half-grown. This didn't please them because they had planned to go down to Sylva. But the old man got his bee-robbing paraphernalia, and they went out to the bee gum. The bee gum is simply a hollow log about three feet high, placed on a board with a hole in the bottom where the bees can go in. Another board is placed on top of all that, with a heavy rock to hold it down — a very uncomplicated beehive.

They started out to rob the bees. One of the boys took a long pole, and as his daddy went past he pushed one of those beehives over. It rolled right under his daddy's legs, and the bees just swarmed up all over him. There wasn't much he could do except run, and he took off through the laurel thickets. One of the boys was telling about it later, and he said, "Friends, you could tell by the movement of the bushes that the old man was a-laboring."

A HARD LUCK STORY

This was one of the favorite stories of my grandfather, Bob Fisher, who for many years operated a general merchandise store in the little community of Addie.

One day one of his mountain friends came into the store. This particular fellow was usually very good-humored, but he seemed to be troubled and had a long face. Finally my grandfather said to him, "Henry, you've got a long face for such a pretty day. What's your trouble?"

The man thought a minute and said, "Aw, Mr. Fisher, we've got real trouble up at our house. You know, we didn't have but one sow, and we're depending on that sow for our meat and lard this winter. Mr. Fisher, she dropped nineteen of the prettiest little pigs you've ever seen. You know what? Every one of them little pigs died except one — and damned if *it* didn't die!"

HOG WITH A PEG-LEG

I have some question about the next mountain story. In some ways it is a cruelty story, which is rather unusual, but for the sake of the record, I shall relate it. I'm not certain of the source, but it was either Kentucky or Arkansas.

A young county agent had heard that there was a farmer up the road who had a hog with a peg-leg. This the agent could hardly believe, so he drove out there to see for himself.

The farmer took him down to the hog-lot, and there was a hog hobbling around with a well-made artificial hind leg. The agent was fascinated. He said to the mountaineer, "I've been all the way 'round the world, and I've seen a lot of hogs, but this is the first one I've ever seen with an artificial leg. Is there a special story about this?"

"Yes," the farmer said, "and I don't mind sharing it with you. A couple of years ago — you see that stump over there? I was cutting that tree down. I'd chopped into it, and notched it, and I was putting my wedge in to fall it, and the wind shifted and a gust caught it. That tree came right over on top of me. It was just about to crush me to death, and that old hog saw it. He rooted out of that lot and came out here and got his back under that tree and got me enough room so that I could wiggle out from under. I'd be a dead farmer if it hadn't been for that hog."

The county agent said, "That's a marvelous story, but it still doesn't tell me about that artificial hind leg."

"Well," the farmer said, "that's one smart hog. Another time, just a little while after that, we'd put in one of these new-fangled wood stoves and we didn't know how to operate it. We'd all gone to bed, and our house caught on fire. That old hog saw it, and he broke out of that pen again and pushed his way in, and raised such a fuss that he woke us up and got us out of the house. Without his help we'd all have been burned up, and the house would have burned down. You appreciate something like that."

The county agent said, "That's great, but you still haven't told me why that hog has such a beautiful artificial hind leg."

The farmer said, "Man, don't you see? It ain't hard to understand. Any hog that's done as much as that one has for me and my family — we ain't going to eat a hog like that all at one time."

HOW TO COOK A CATFISH

Any mountaineer knows that there are two kinds of catfish. There is a blue catfish which, when properly dressed and cooked, has sweet and delicious meat. There is the yellow or mud-cat which, unless prepared in a very special way, always has the taste of mud and the river bottom.

The only way to cook a mud-cat is to skin it carefully, preferably the day before it is to be cooked so that it can take some salt for at least twenty-four hours. When the fish has been thoroughly salted, it should be dried with a towel and then split down the middle and tacked, back down, to a piece of oak plank.

When this has been done, the catfish should be carefully sprinkled with some big chunks of good yellow country butter. Salt it a little more, pepper it well, cover with slices of onion, and put on top some thin slices of bacon. The catfish then should be put in the oven at 350 degrees and allowed to remain there for about forty-five minutes. Do not baste, and do not open the oven.

After about forty-five minutes, open the oven and poke the catfish gently with a fork. If the meat falls away from the bone, then remove the catfish, throw the catfish away, and eat the board.

AT HOME IN THE ORPHANAGE

This is not a funny story, but it is memorable to me for its human interest.

A cousin of mine from the mountains, W. C. Reid, with the help of his wife, Millie, headed the North Carolina Baptist Orphanage for years. They were greatly loved.

A mountain family of five children had been torn up by the death of the father in a logging accident and by the sudden death of the mother not long afterward. Their pastor and one of the deacons, without even telephoning the orphanage, put all the children and their clothes into a car and drove them to the orphanage one Sunday afternoon and left them.

Millie said later, "I didn't know what to do. We couldn't put them in a cottage that night, so I went upstairs and made up three beds. We had plenty of room. They were sniffing and crying, and we finally persuaded them to eat a little — not much — and drink some milk, and we put them to bed.

"Next morning they came down for breakfast. I'd scrambled eggs and cooked bacon, and I had jelly and toast on the table, and pitchers of milk. They just sat there and shook their heads.

"And I noticed one of them looking back through the kitchen. There was a plate of yesterday's biscuits sitting there on a side table, and suddenly it dawned on me: I remembered what they were probably used to having for breakfast.

"With our modern child-care theories, no case worker would have approved, but I went back there and got them each a cup of black coffee, stirred it about half full of sugar, and brought them

those left-over biscuits. They crumbled those biscuits into the coffee and ate like little hungry wolves.”

FLOODING THE MARKET

My grandfather Fisher was noted for his community interest. Although he had little formal education himself (having been born about the time of the Civil War), he never ceased to plug for education and anything else that would improve the community. He was a prosperous farmer, and in addition he owned a big merchandise store at the foot of the Balsam Mountain. He heard that Buncombe County had engaged in something new in farming. They had employed a county farm agent who helped the farmers improve their land and the quality of their produce. Since Grandpa was always in favor of progress, at his own expense he arranged to have this man come over from Buncombe County on the train. He pushed back everything in the feed room and prepared for all who were interested to come and hear this young man speak. There was a fire burning in the big old Warm Morning stove in the feed room, surrounded by a sawdust box so that they could do their chewing and spitting. About thirty-five or forty mountain farmers gathered skeptically to hear what this young man had to say about teaching them to farm.

He gave them a talk about diversification of crops so that they'd have a little something, as they say in the mountains, "to bring them in some cash money." One of the men who had gathered there was a well-known character by the name of John L. Jones. John L. was a good provider, but he had a rough time on a mountain farm over behind Dark Ridge. He sat and listened as the man explained about soil conservation and rotating crops.

The young farm agent said, "The thing that you men really need to do is to raise something you can sell all year long. For example, one of the things you could raise would be frying-size

chickens, and those will sell almost any time of the year."

When he had finished, Grandpa asked for remarks or observations.

The mountaineer is "not much on talking." Finally Grandpa turned and said, "John L., what do you think about this?"

John L. rose and spit in the sawdust box and said, "Young man, about them fryers, just let me tell you something—tell you what I can do. I can go up here on the mountain. I've got a few fryers. I can catch a half-dozen of 'em and dress 'em out, and take 'em down to Sylva and glut the damn market."

THREE KINDS OF PIE

This story was told to me by a mountain preacher who has long since gone to his rest. He enjoyed telling it, and I enjoyed listening.

He was holding a revival meeting once in a sparsely settled mountain community, and the preachers had been invited out to supper away up in the head of a little cove. They made their way up as far as they could go in a car; then they crossed a footlog, and there suddenly, in a little clearing on the side of the mountain, was a long, low cabin with a lean-to on the north side. As they went in, there was that nice, clean, fresh smell of floors that had been scrubbed with lye soap, and a fireplace that had been freshly whitewashed. Coming from the kitchen were all those delightful aromas associated with good mountain cooking. The lady of the house welcomed them and assured them that supper would be ready in just a minute. They sat down, then, at a long wooden table with no cloth, but loaded with good mountain vegetables, fruits, fried chicken, and ham.

She said, "Now, preacher, we don't make company out of anybody here. Just take out and eat your supper. Eat all you want, but just keep in mind this one thing—I've got three kinds of dessert."

In those days, the preacher said, he was mighty fond of sweets, and he actually "pushed back" before he had finished, and said to the good lady of the house, "I've finished my supper now, and I'm really looking forward to the three kinds of dessert."

She said, "I've got three kinds, just like I told you. It's kivered, unkivered, and crisscross, but it's all apple pie."

FOUNDERED

This story was told many times by my grandmother, and my father told it with great relish as long as he lived.

I suppose that some in this day and generation may not be able to appreciate all the humor of this story without an explanation of the term *foundered*. An animal such as a cow or hog or horse is said to be foundered if it eats too much. At times this term is applied humorously to human beings.

Another comment that may be needed is that in the economy of the mountains, most people ate cornbread at least twice a day. "Wheatbread," as it was sometimes called, was usually reserved for breakfast and many times only for special occasions, especially if it had yeast in it, in which case it was called "lightbread."

A very fine family — wife, husband, and about seven or eight "young-uns" — had a little mountain farm down below where my grandfather lived, and the whole family was inordinately fond of hot biscuits and butter. Since they were a poor family, and wheat was scarce, they didn't have this treat often. But in the spring of the year up on the side of the mountain under Black Rock they were clearing a new ground, which is hard work, and some of the boys kept begging their mother for all the biscuits and butter they could eat.

About the middle of the afternoon one day, their mother, who was a good friend of my grandmother, came up and said, "Lilly, I want you to do me a favor."

My grandmother said, "Of course, if I can. What do you want?"

She said, "How many bread pans have you got?"

Grandma said, "Oh, I've got several."

She said, "I want to borrow every one of them, if you can spare them. You know that crowd I've got — they've never had enough hot buttered biscuit and sourwood honey. We robbed the beehives, and we've got some of the prettiest, clearest sourwood honey we've ever had. I'll bring you some when I bring the pans back. Tonight I'm going to founde them on biscuits and honey. I'm going to feed them all they can eat. I'm going to need every pan you've got."

That night Mrs. Jones flew in and got a good fire going in that old Foster range, and she made her biscuits. She had great crocks of yellow butter, and she had plenty of sourwood honey and molasses. They came in from the field, went straight to the back porch and washed their hands and faces, came in and sat down, and they all just ate until they fell away from the table.

Mrs. Jones told my grandmother next day, "I foundered 'em all right. I thought that was the last I'd hear of it. They ate until I didn't think they would ever want to see another biscuit. They went to bed, and got up this morning and started back to the new ground. You know that littlest boy of mine? On the way out, he pulled me by the apron and said, 'Ma, how about foundering us again tonight on honey and hot biscuits?'"

CIPHERING

Another story I should like to pass on has to do with one of my great-grandfathers, who was a merchant and a man of property. He had done very well for his time and day and generation. He had one slight handicap, though, that continues to be something of an embarrassment to the family. There was

little schooling to be had when he was growing up during the Civil War, and as a matter of fact, the old man couldn't read and write.

A business man came in from Atlanta, and he found out that old man Davey couldn't read and write. While staying at the local boarding house, he "made his brag" that he would trim the old man in a trade.

He stayed for three or four days, but things didn't work out as he had planned. His friends almost had to take up money to get him out of town. As they were putting him on the stagecoach, someone asked him about how he had fared with his trade. He said, "Friends, I'll be frank with you. It is true that the old man Davey can't read and write, but friends, he can cipher to beat hell."

COMPANY NUISANCE

This story was a favorite of my Uncle David Brown, and he told it of his grandfather, a prosperous and well-known farmer who lived in one of the first frame houses in Jackson County (which is still standing). It was located on a route where many "drummers" and friends and relatives found it convenient to come by and spend the night. Since he was a very hospitable person, there were a few who really abused the privilege.

There was one man — no relation to the family whatsoever — who had become something of a nuisance. He would drop by sometimes and stay four days at a time and expect to be fed and bedded himself, and also have feed furnished for his horse.

One night after supper they were sitting out on the front porch, having their after-supper chew of tobacco and waiting for dark and bedtime. The guest who had already outstayed his welcome was trying to strike up a conversation. He finally spit and said, "Well, Mr. Brown, there's a lot of people coming and going here. I guess all these comers and goers sorta worry you sometimes."

Grandfather Brown said, "Friend, it's not the comers and goers that bother me; it's these comers and stayers."

THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT

Games came in seasons for children in the mountains, and in the spring a boy had no social status at all unless he had plenty of marbles. For that reason the paper sack that Uncle Lewis Broyles had handed me for my eighth birthday had been a huge disappointment. It was full of marshmallows.

My thanks were brief, and I carried my present down to the bridge over the Tuckasegee River at Webster, where I hung over the rail for awhile and brooded about adults who had forgotten how important marbles are. I even considered dropping the marshmallows into the stream. However, I decided to make a concession and eat one.

It was at that point that I discovered that Uncle Lewis had not forgotten his boyhood after all. He had hidden a beautiful marble in every one of those marshmallows, and made my eighth birthday one of the most memorable of my life.

AIN'T HE GROWED?

The following story is one of my personal experiences that I cherish.

As a young man I was very fond of Aunt Sarah. She was no relative of mine, but she was "Aunt Sarah" to all the young people. I think the main reason we loved her was that she always had a jar of sugar cookies, and when we'd come by for any occasion, she always managed to slip one into our hand and two for our pockets.

After I had left my little mountain community where I was

born, and had been gone many years, I was invited back to hold a revival meeting at the River Hill Baptist Church. Uncle Will Cook was pastor, and I had really looked forward to renewing old acquaintances. He said to me one day, "We ought to go up on the mountain. There's somebody I want you to see: it's Aunt Sarah."

I said, "Isn't it some surprise that Aunt Sarah is still living?"

"Yes," he said, "she's still living and enjoying life. I know she'll be glad to see you." So we went up on the mountain, parked our car, and walked up a steep front yard. Aunt Sarah was sitting in her rocking chair on one end of the porch in the shade, stringing Kentucky Wonder beans. It was a hot day, and she had pushed her glasses up on her head.

Uncle Will said, "Aunt Sarah, this is the preacher. I've got somebody here to see you. Do you know who this is?"

Aunt Sarah pulled her glasses down and looked at me intently for a few seconds, and then a great smile broke over her face. "Why," she said, "it's Ben Coleman Fisher. Ain't he grewed!"

BETWEEN LOUISVILLE AND FRANKFORT

This is a true story told to me by my good friend and former colleague, Bill Strickland, who was for some years professor of New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and later became dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Appalachian State University at Boone, North Carolina.

While he was still a student at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, Bill was pastor of a little church near Frankfort. One day two members of his church hired a friend who owned a truck to take some young steers to Louisville so that they could sell them at the Bourbon Stock Market there.

They invited a neighbor who could neither read nor write and had never been beyond the county line to accompany them

on the sixty-mile trip. As they made their way to Louisville, the neighbor talked incessantly. Following the sale of the steers and a good lunch they headed for home. The neighbor was absolutely silent until the truck passed through the town of Shelbyville when all of a sudden he excitedly broke the silence by saying: "Fellows, let me tell you something. If there's as much land on the other side of Louisville as there is between Frankfort and Louisville, this is a big world!"

GETTING OUT THE STRAIGHT BOARD

This story again illustrates something of the wisdom of the mountaineer.

On a good-sized mountain farm worked a very good carpenter who never would clean up his shop. The floor was always covered with scraps of wood, shavings, and sawdust. The man for whom he worked had complained about the clutter a time or two, but he really spoke sharply about it one morning when he came in and found the shop almost knee-deep.

The carpenter was busy shaping a board for the tailgate of a wagon. He looked up slowly, took his plane off the board, and let it swing down to his side as he gave a big sigh. "Brother," he said, "is there anything wrong with the work?"

"No, it's just that you're so — just look at all those shavings on the floor, and that sawdust. This place hasn't been swept."

"Well," the carpenter said, "just to tell you the truth, it takes a heap of shavings to get out one straight board."

'SIMMONS

This story concerns my cousin and lifelong friend Mack Hall. It is reprinted from *Historic Webster* (Winter 1982) Volume VIII, Number 4.

Uncle Dick Hall occasionally used to make a corn crop in Muster-ground Hollow, which was just over the hill from Aunt Mollie Fisher's home. When he and his boys came to work the crop, Aunt Lela would send a huge dinner basket, which would always contain, among other things, some half-moon, fried dried-apple pies, of which I was inordinately fond. I would make it a point to get up to the Muster-ground Hollow just a little while before they would sit down under some spreading oak trees to have their dinner.

Mack, the oldest boy, said to me one day, "Ben Coleman, do you like persimmons?"

I said, "I don't know—I never tried one."

He said, "They sure are tasty before dinner. Would you like one?"

Mack got up, walked over to a small tree, pulled off a green persimmon, and handed it to me. I must have been about six years old. I popped the green persimmon into my mouth, bit down on it, and promptly spit it out.

Mack said, "Ah, pshaw. I forgot to peel it."

So Mack got another green persimmon and peeled it very carefully. By the time I had chewed it up, my mouth was so puckered that I couldn't even spit it out, and I set up a fearful howl. I went running home, and my mother was "hopping mad," as they say in the mountains. She was "in a hissy!" She went charging up to the new ground after Mack. It took Uncle Dick some little time to arrange a cease-fire, but the truce lasted more than half a century.

THAT 'S NO REASON

When my good friend Dr. Dafydd Davies, then chairman of the faculty of theology of the University of Wales and principal of South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff, heard some of my

mountain stories at an international conference at Ridgecrest, North Carolina, he said he had a good mountain story he wanted to share from Wales.

The city of Swansea, forty miles west of Cardiff, as a result of extensive industrial development within its boundaries, found itself short of an adequate water supply to meet all its needs, especially during the dry seasons. The government in Britain can act much more swiftly than ours in condemning land, using the old English right of public domain. The Swansea city fathers moved with great speed toward condemning a little valley and throwing a dam across it to provide a new reservoir. The implementation of this plan would have destroyed a village with a small Baptist church and a cemetery. Basic proceedings were already under way, and property owners had been notified.

The Welsh Baptist preacher was determined that it should not happen, and put on a preservation campaign with such vigor that he attracted the attention of the British Broadcasting Corporation, who invited him to debate the matter one Sunday afternoon on television.

In the heat of the debate, the television interviewer said, "And besides everything else, it's not a very pretty little valley."

"Sir," the preacher fired back, "by no stretch of the imagination could you say that my wife is pretty, but that's no reason to drown her!"

The little valley is still there.

A PROBLEM IN COMMUNICATION

Humorous situations usually arise basically from fact, and this story could not have been invented — it actually happened, and has been passed on from my great-uncle through our family.

Into the town of Sylva, North Carolina, located deep in the heart of the Smoky Mountains, came a man by the name of Bill,

who opened up a combination tombstone shop and harness shop. He hadn't been there long when a big strapping mountaineer, whom we shall call Tom, rode into Sylva one Saturday morning on a big bay mare. Tom was a well-known citizen in the community. He stood six feet six in his stocking feet, weighed over two hundred fifty pounds, and didn't have one ounce of fat on him. He had something wrong with his saddle, and he'd heard that there was a man in town who had opened a harness shop and could fix it.

Now there was something unusual about both of these men. Bill, who ran the combination tombstone factory and harness shop, was deaf and dumb, and no one had told Tom about this. And Tom couldn't read or write.

He rode to the harness shop, got off his horse, strode over to Bill, and began to tell him how he wanted his saddle mended. Bill commenced immediately to make some gestures toward his ears and lips to show that he couldn't hear and couldn't talk. He wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to Tom. Tom looked at the piece of paper, and then he said, "Friend, this is a mess. This is a real mess. You can write, and I can't read it. I can talk, and you can't hear it. Just fix this saddle, and I'll be back in about an hour."

I DON'T KNOW WHERE WE'RE GOING

It seems that two tall mountain boys were making their way to another part of the county one Saturday and got into unfamiliar territory. They came to a place where there was a fork in the road, and three or four signs pointing this way and that way. One old boy stood there and looked at the signs and said, "Friend, we've got us a problem. You know, I can read figures, but I can't read writin'. I know how far it is, but I don't know where we're going."

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

One Saturday afternoon a blacksmith in a small mountain town had just finished shaping a horseshoe on his forge. He had, of course, first heated it red hot, shaped it very carefully to fit the horse's hoof, and then — with a pair of iron tongs — plunged the horseshoe quickly into a tub of water.

He had just pulled it out and thrown it on a bench where it was continuing to cool when an old mountain boy came shambling into the blacksmith's shop to look around. The boy walked over to the bench and picked up that horseshoe. It was still very hot, and he threw it down quickly and shook his hand hard.

The blacksmith looked over and said, "Son, that was too hot for you to handle, wasn't it?"

The boy said, "No, sir, it just doesn't take me very long to look at a horseshoe."

A WHOLE KEGFUL

My grandfather had a country store at Addie, North Carolina, and one day a small boy came in just after a keg of maple sugar had been opened and set in front of the counter. The boy kept eying it, and finally Granddaddy Bob said, "Would you like to taste that?"

"Mr. Fisher," said the boy, "I could eat that whole keg."

My grandfather was wise as well as kind. He said, "Well, eat all you can."

He had to go into the back room to fill a jug of kerosene for a customer, and when he came back, he found the boy ready to leave, licking his fingers and wiping them on his overalls. There was only a small depression in the very center of the keg, where the boy had hollowed out a little of the pure sugar.

"I thought you were going to eat the whole kegful," Granddaddy said.

"Mr. Fisher," the boy replied, "I already ate all that was any good."

THE UMPIRE

The story that follows illustrates the quick wit and natural humor of the mountaineer.

A young man came down off the mountain into the valley looking for work. He had no cash, and he couldn't find a job at first. Finally, he talked a second time to the owner of the general store, who said, "Well, I still don't have anything, but do you know anything about baseball?"

"Yep," was the reply.

"Have you ever refereed a baseball game?"

"Yes, I've called a few games."

"Well," the storekeeper said, "we're having a ball game here tonight. Our umpire is sick, and we haven't been able to find anybody to take his place. We're paying ten dollars."

"Oh, man," the boy said, "for ten dollars — yes, I'll call that game."

That night the two teams came in and took their positions on the field, the pitcher went to the mound, the catcher crouched behind the plate, and the batter stepped up. The mountaineer had put on his breast protector and face mask, turned his cap around backwards, and picked up his mitt. He "hunkered down," and the pitcher wound up and fired a ball. It went across the plate, and the young mountaineer called, "Strike one!"

At that, the batter whirled around and chewed him out, the manager jumped off the bench, and they were about to mob him.

He got that strife settled. The pitcher cut loose again and threw another fast ball. The old mountain boy shouted, "Ball one!"

The pitcher tore off the mound and dashed over to dispute the call, and the young umpire thought the pitcher was going to strike him. He was a little shaken, but he managed to get the pitcher back on the mound, and he got down behind the plate again. When the pitcher cut loose another ball, the mountain boy stood up and said, "Too!"

Here came the catcher and the batter and everybody else: "What do you mean by *two*?"

He said, "Friends, it's just *too* close to call."

MERCIFUL JUSTICE

This is a different kind of story, but it says a great deal about mountain people. Besides having the gift of humor, they're big-hearted and neighborly.

My cousin, Dan Moore, for many years was a circuit court judge in western North Carolina. He later became governor of the state and then served on the North Carolina Supreme Court.

He was holding civil court once in Waynesville, and not far from that city, in a small mountain community, was a Baptist church whose members had added on some Sunday School rooms. The contractor had said that when they got down to the last thousand dollars, he'd donate that. The contractor was killed in an accident, but the congregation felt that they didn't owe the money and had refused to pay it. However, the estate sued the church; consequently the case had to be tried.

It came to court, and Dan Moore told me, "I sat on the bench, and it seemed a very clear-cut case; it didn't take long for it to go to the jury. I instructed the jury," he said, "and it didn't seem to me that there was much doubt that the jury was going to have

to find in favor of the plaintiff, and the little church was going to have to pay that money."

He said the jury was gone, and gone, and gone. An hour passed, and they were still gone, and he said, "I just couldn't understand it. I was afraid we were going to have a hung jury, and I was about ready to send the bailiff to find out what was going on."

Finally, they filed back in, and the foreman of the jury stood up and said, "Judge —."

Judge Moore said, "Wait just a minute. Have you reached a verdict?"

"Yes, we have, but I wonder if I could make a statement?"

The judge said, "Certainly. Go ahead."

"Well," he said, "Judge, it didn't take us ten minutes to decide the case. It was very clear-cut. We found for the plaintiff, and the little church is going to have to pay this thousand dollars. But," he said, "the reason we've been out so long is that we've been making that money up, and we're still short about two hundred dollars. I wonder if we could take an offering here in the courtroom?"

Dan said, "They passed a hat to me first, and we passed hats around through the courtroom, and we oversubscribed that thousand dollars."

This is a mountain idea of justice tempered with mercy.

WHUPPED OR KILLED

Another good story connected with my cousin Dan Moore is an excellent illustration of several aspects of human nature.

Dan Moore was holding court once in Sylva, and it seems that a group of men had been in a poker game in a little sawmill town, and had got "roaring drunk." In the process, one man had

taken his knife and cut a fellow up so badly that he died. The attacker was tried for manslaughter and convicted, and he got five to seven years in the state penitentiary. This was the first time the old boy had ever been in any trouble, and so the governor reduced his sentence, and, with time off for good behavior, he was in prison only a couple of years.

The day before he was to get out, he got hold of a paper somehow, and saw that Dan Moore was in Raleigh along with his wife, Jeanelle, for some kind of judiciary meeting. He learned that they were staying at the Sir Walter Hotel. As soon as he got out of prison, he went down and stood in front of the hotel, and when he saw Dan Moore coming, he said, "Judge, do you remember me?"

Dan looked at him a minute and said, "Yes, I believe you're from up near Sylva."

He said, "Yes, Judge, I'm the man you sent down here for cutting that man up." And he added, "You know I don't get rich working down here. I understand you're going back to Sylva, and I just wonder if I could get a ride with you back home."

Dan said, "Certainly, I'd be glad to have you."

When his wife, Jeanelle, found out about that, she was terrified, but it was already done, as she told it later. She said, "We got ready to go, and that man was still there. He got in the back seat, and I got in the front with Dan. I sat at an angle, and didn't take my eyes off him. I had a crick in my neck for a week. It's nearly three hundred miles from Raleigh on up to Sylva, but we made it all right. We got up on top of the Balsam Mountains, and started down at a place called Dark Ridge, and he said, 'All right, Judge, now pull over.'"

Jeanelle said, "I thought, 'Here it is. It's coming now.'"

She said he got out and stretched himself and walked around and said, "Well, Judge, you can let me out here, and I can cut right across the mountains, and I'll be home with my family before you can be in Sylva. I just appreciate what you've done for me so much," he said. "You know I don't have any money, but I

just want you to know one thing: if there's ever any time that you want anybody whupped or killed, you just let me know."

THE NEW JAIL

This story is, as a matter of fact, a true one, and illustrates the keen sense of humor of the mountaineer and his ability to picture a ridiculous situation in an easy manner.

I shall not name the county or the county seat, but in a little mountain town the grand jury met and after an inspection condemned the county jail, and ordered the commissioners to build a new one.

The commissioners knew they had the court order, and knew the jail should be condemned, but they were short of money. They argued and argued. Finally one old mountaineer got up and said, "Brethren, we can't stay here all day. I want to make a motion."

The chairman said, "Well, John, that is what we are here for. You just go ahead and make your motion."

"Well," he said, "Mr. Chairman of the County Board of Commissioners, I want to make the following motion: One, I move, sir, that, as the grand jury has directed, we tear down the old jail. Two, I move that we build the new jail out of the materials of the old jail. Three, I move, sir, that we use the old jail until the new jail is ready."

The motion passed, and the meeting was adjourned.

WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

We had stopped at a small country store with a gas pump, and the mountain storekeeper was filling the tank. He watched

our two small boys working off the energy that had been pent up during the car trip; and as they coasted around, he asked, "Where do you come from, boys?"

"Boiling Springs," they both replied.

"Where's that?" he asked. They were too little to know how to identify their home town on the map.

"Is it east or west of here?" They didn't know that either. "How many miles away?" They had no idea how far we had traveled that day.

But a mountaineer is resourceful. "Well, boys, where do you get your hair cut?"

"Shelby," they chorused, and the problem was solved.

CATALOOCHEE BAPTIST CHURCH

This story happened not far from Waynesville, North Carolina, in the heart of the Cataloochee country, which was once one of the rougher, wilder sections of Haywood County.

Brother Thad Dietz and Phil Elliott were on their way one Sunday morning to preach and lead the singing at a revival meeting at Cataloochee Baptist Church. I have mentioned both these men elsewhere in this book. Brother Dietz was a great mountain preacher, who — as they say back in "them thar hills" — had "pastored" two generations of my family and was greatly loved by all the people in the coves and hollows. He lived by the Bible and out of the love of his heart for his people. Phil Elliott, who later became president of Gardner-Webb College, was in his younger days another great mountain preacher. He taught English at what is now Western Carolina University, and he was a master storyteller.

As Phil and Brother Thad drove deeper into the territory, they became completely lost, and it was getting on toward

preaching time. Just about the time they were despairing of what to do, they saw a long, tall mountaineer loping down the road, and they pulled over as they approached him. He had about three or four days' growth of beard, and was wearing overalls and a blue shirt; his hat was pulled down over his ears. He said, "Howdy, fellas."

They said, "How do you do, sir. We were wondering how to reach the Cataloochee Baptist Church. Are we anywhere close?"

The mountaineer spit, scratched his head, and said, "Well, friends, I'll just have to tell you this: it's a way hellward from here."

REACHING HIGH

The mountaineer has often been depicted as shiftless and lazy, and this is absolutely untrue — a lazy mountaineer is a very, very rare exception. However, there *were* some exceptions, as there are in any community. This story was passed on by an uncle of mine.

Living in an old frame house on the upper side of my uncle's farm was a man not noted for his energy, for working, or even for paying his rent, but my uncle let him live there. If this man had a little meal and some "side meat" and a little chewing tobacco, he figured that he could make the rest by fishing and hunting.

My uncle was driving by one day in his buggy, and he noticed something unusual about that house. He turned around, went back, and discovered that the weather-boarding on the side of the house, all the way up to the top of the window frame, was missing. He knew what had happened, and he got out of his buggy and called this man out into the yard and said, "John, the woods is just full of kindling, and you are too lazy to go get it. You have burned the siding off my house for kindling. Look, man, you have taken it off all the way up to the top of that window frame."

Old John looked my uncle straight in the eye and said, "Frank, don't blame me. That is as high as I could reach."

NOT SO STUPID

I heard this latter-day story a good many years ago in Jackson County, at an associational meeting.

It seems that a psychologist was spending his summer vacation there. He was a man of great sophistication and education — he'd published a number of books — and he was fascinated with mountain people. He considered himself several cuts above them, and he wasn't quite certain how bright they were. They seemed to him to be ignorant and primitive, but he liked to listen to them talk.

While he was out for his constitutional one morning, strolling along, he met an old mountain boy who talked with a drawl, and had on a pair of overalls, a floppy straw hat, and brogan shoes with no socks. "Let's stop a minute," the psychologist said. "I'd like to talk to you."

The boy said, "Well, I've got a little time. They's a couple of stumps here. Let's just sit and talk a spell."

The psychologist began, "How long have you lived here in the mountains?"

"Well, I was born and raised here. I been here all my life."

The psychologist said, "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions — give you a little psychology test?"

"What's a psychology test?"

"Well, it's a sort of test of the mind. It shows whether you're quick or slow."

The old boy said, "Well, I reckon I'm a little slow, but I've managed to do all right. I make a living and pay my debts."

The psychologist asked the boy a few general questions

about where he lived, the size of his family, and so on, and then he really got down to the little psychological test: "First of all, how many fingers do you see?"

He held up three fingers, and the mountaineer said, "I see one — two — I see three."

"Listen carefully: what would happen if I put out your eyes?"

The old boy thought a minute. "Well," he said, "mister, if you put out my eyes, I couldn't see."

"You're doing fine," the psychologist said. "Now, if I cut off your ears, what would happen?"

The old boy thought again and said, "Friend, if you cut off my ears, I reckon I couldn't see."

The psychologist said, "Now wait a minute. Let's start over. You know that's not right. How many fingers do you see?"

The boy said, "I see three."

"Listen carefully: what would happen if I put out your eyes?"

"Mister, I couldn't see."

"Now," the psychologist said, "listen one more time. What would happen if I cut off your ears?"

The boy repeated, "Friend, if you cut my ears off, I couldn't see."

"Well!" the psychologist said. "Now, young man, you know better than that. What do you mean, if your ears were cut off, you couldn't see?"

The boy said, "Friend, if you cut my ears off, my hat drops down over my eyes, and I can't see!"

THE PARACHUTE

This story pokes a little fun at expertise.

An old mountain boy had never been up in an airplane and

said he never intended to go. But someone came into the community with a small open-cockpit plane, and almost everyone in that little village went for a ride, circled the pasture, and landed. They all seemed to enjoy it, and they kept coaxing this old boy, but he said, "No, I'm not going up there. What happens is that a man could get killed."

"Oh," they said, "it's perfectly safe. We've got a parachute for you. If anything happens, you just jerk that ripcord, and you'll float right to the ground."

"Well," the old boy said, "if you've got a parachute and you think it's safe, I just might try it."

They talked him into getting into the plane, but in the process they forgot two very important details: they failed to put his seat-belt on, and they forgot to tell him how to open that parachute.

The pilot took off, circled the field two or three times, and when they got up to about seven or eight thousand feet, he said to that old mountain boy, "Friend, how are you doing?"

"Oh," he said, "this is great! I wish I'd tried it before."

"Well," the pilot said, "now we're going back to the field, and I'm going to have to make a pretty sharp turn, so hold on."

The pilot banked the plane rather steeply, and since his passenger's seat-belt hadn't been fastened, the old mountain boy fell out. He was picking up speed and clawing around because he didn't know how to open that parachute. About that time, he looked down, and here came a little fellow coming right up, and whizzing by him. As the fellow passed him, the mountain boy said, "Friend, do you know anything about opening a parachute?"

The fellow looked back down and said, "No, sir. Do you know anything about a gas heater?"

NEVER WENT TO COLLEGE MYSELF

This is not really a mountain story, but I'm certain that the old man chiefly involved must have had ancestors who moved from the mountains to the flatlands of eastern North Carolina.

At any rate, shortly after we moved to Wake Forest, North Carolina, where I joined the administration and faculty of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, I had occasion to make the short trip to Raleigh, North Carolina (which is, of course, the state capital). I was driving a vintage Pontiac with a rather uncertain gas gauge. I had driven about six or seven miles when the unmistakable sputter began to occur, and I knew that I was out of gas. I looked around quickly; to my right there stood a farmhouse and what appeared to be a gas pump near an outbuilding. I wheeled into a dirt road and had just enough momentum to coast up almost even with the gas tank. There was an old man sitting on the step of what appeared to be a corncrib. He was whittling. So I got out to explain to him my predicament.

I said, "Sir, my name is Ben Fisher. I teach over here at Southeastern Seminary at Wake Forest, and I'm out of gas. I see you have a gas pump here, and I was wondering whether you could just sell me a couple of gallons so that I'd have enough to get to a gas station."

The old man got up slowly, put his stick down, closed up his knife on the palm of his hand and slipped it into his pocket, brushed off his overalls, and said, "Yeah, I guess I could." We pushed the car up to where he could get the nozzle into the tank, and he put out a couple of gallons of gas. In those days a gallon of gas was not very expensive (I think the whole deal didn't amount to more than sixty cents).

I paid him, and he carefully pocketed the money, and I said, "I surely do thank you."

He looked straight at me a minute and said, "You say you're over here at Wake Forest?"

And I said, "That's right."

"Well," he said, "friend, I've never been to college myself, but I've always managed to keep gas in my car."

ON SMOKING

This story is another from my own Jackson County, and it was told by Brother Thad Dietz, whom I have mentioned elsewhere in this book.

There came to the church a young pastor who was down on the use of tobacco in all its evil forms. He kept preaching about it. He had a sermon on dancing, too, and he was against most of the colleges, but smoking was a sin he denounced often. Finally the deacons met at the home of Brother Dietz, who had retired and built a house not far from the Scott's Creek church.

The deacons were of a mind to tell the young man that perhaps he had the wrong church. Brother Thad said, "Oh, brethren, he's young, and he needs all the help he can get. Now you know we dip, and chew, and smoke, and we're not going to stop. Let's just drag it to death. He'll get tired of it."

Not long afterward, one Sunday morning Brother Dietz came into church. It was impossible not to know when he came in, because in his vest-pocket, as always, he had an old pipe half full of half-smoked tobacco, and in the pocket on the other side were his matches. The pastor's sermon subject was tobacco again, and several times when he said, "I don't see how a Christian smokes," he looked straight at Brother Dietz.

Outside after church, Brother Thad took that old pipe and packed it full of tobacco, took out two matches, and motioned to the young preacher to come over. He raked those two matches along the seat of his pants, and covered everybody nearby with blue tobacco smoke, and then fanned it away. "Now," he said, "I want to show you how a Christian smokes."

CHEWING TOBACCO

Most of the old-time mountain preachers not only raised tobacco but they chewed it, dipped it, smoked it, and sometimes even sniffed it. It was considered a staple household item, and many mountain people believed that tobacco, in addition to giving enjoyment in its use, also possessed an untold number of medicinal qualities.

However, there moved into a mountain community a younger preacher who had other ideas about the use of tobacco. He took every occasion to denounce it from the pulpit — he talked to individuals about it — in fact, sought to eliminate its use altogether, without too much success. It took an old mountain preacher to give him his “comeuppance.”

One afternoon at an associational meeting the young man went up to the old preacher and said, “Sir, I don’t see how you can chew tobacco and preach the gospel.”

The old mountaineer flushed; he looked at the ground, and he looked slowly up at the sky; he moved his cud of tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other, scratched the stubble on his chin a little, looked at the young man and said thoughtfully, “Well, son, I can tell you this: it sure does beat preaching tobacco and chewing the gospel.”

THE BEST MAN IN THE COMMUNITY

This story, I believe, came originally from the Madison County area in North Carolina, where it seems there lived a man who took inordinate pride in his physique, his strength, and his ability to “lick” any man in the surrounding countryside. He had heard that across the mountain there was a man who had never been defeated in a fight. So he decided he ought to do something about that situation.

He got up early one morning, having nothing better to do, saddled his mule, and rode across the mountain. Down in the

valley he came to a crossroad where there was a little mountain store. He got off and went in to see the storekeeper, and said, "Friend, I understand that there's a man in this community who says that he can whip any man in the world and has never lost a fight."

The old storekeeper studied a minute and said, "Well, I think you must be talking about my friend who lives right up here at the head of this hollow. I think he's breaking new ground. You just follow that trail, and there's a fence around one side of that new ground. Just ride all the way around until you come to the end of that fence, and you'll catch him out there in the field."

The man thanked him, got on the mule, went on up to the head of the hollow, and found the man out there plowing the new ground. He rode along that fence until he came to the end of it, turned into the field where the man was plowing, and as he got off his mule, he said to the plowman, "Friend, they tell me that you're the best man in this community."

The plowman stopped a minute and said, "Well, that's what they say."

"I'm here to challenge that," he said. "I've come here to whup you. I'm going to whup you good."

The plowman said, "Well, we'll see." He very carefully folded up his lines, hung them on the hames, and grabbed that man and just wiped up the ground with him. He whipped him every way that a man can be whipped and finally, he just carried the man over and threw him across that barbed-wire fence, right out into the middle of the trail.

The man got up and dusted himself off, and the plowman said, "Stranger, is there anything else I can do for you?"

The man kept brushing himself off, and said at last, "Yes, would you mind pitching me my mule?"

DRIVING A NAIL

This is a good illustration of the way mountain humor and common sense can often be used to relieve tense situations.

This story has its origin in a little Baptist church on the side of Balsam Mountain. It took place one night during a stormy church session. One particular deacon thought the only way to solve a problem was to get up and take the hide and hair off everything and everybody in sight. When he had finally vented all his spleen, a wise old fellow-deacon got up and calmly remarked, "Brother Jones, we love you, but I'm going to say something to you that I've been wanting to say a long time. Do you know what your trouble is, Henry? You don't know how to drive a nail in a board without busting the plank."

ANVILS

This story came from eastern Kentucky.

Back before the railroads or any other form of transportation except boat or horse or mule power, an old mountain boy who had had a hard winter went from high up in the Cumberland Mountains down to a little community on the Cumberland River to make some "cash money for spending." He looked all over the little town, and the only thing he could get to do was unloading a barge that had just come in. In those days the pay was about twenty-five cents an hour. Among other items on the barge were several dozen anvils for blacksmith shops. These anvils weighed about a hundred and fifty or two hundred pounds each. The merchant said, "If you'll unload these anvils, I'll give you a dollar an hour."

This old mountaineer was tall and rangy, well-muscled and very strong. He approached his job with enthusiasm. He marched up the gangplank and down onto the deck, and picked up one of those hundred-and-fifty-pound anvils in each hand.

Then he started off the barge. About the middle of the gang-plank, with his weight plus the weight of the anvils, the gang-plank broke, and he fell into about thirty or forty feet of that muddy river water. He was thrashing around down there, and finally he yelled, "Listen, fellers, if somebody don't help me soon, I'm going to have to let one of these go."

ON NAGGIN'

This is one of several stories told on Uncle Dave Norman, and presumed to be true.

Uncle Dave was a well-known and well-loved mountain preacher. His people seldom, if ever, caught a "mess" of fish or killed a deer without sharing with him, and when their gardens or their crops came in, they were generous.

Uncle Dave's wife was known as Aunt Sarah. They sometimes disagreed, as husbands and wives are wont to do. One morning Uncle Dave was up about the place, getting in some firewood and filling up the reservoir on the stove. He and Aunt Sarah were having an argument, and she was getting the better of him. He turned to her and said, "Sarah, you want me to tell you something? Honey, you've worried me and nagged me till, to tell you the truth, I may be the meanest of the two."

SWEARING A CHARACTER

Uncle Dave was a good mountain preacher who was known far and wide for his kindness and for his availability in times of trouble. One Monday morning about daylight, long before most people had got out of their beds, a young man knocked on the front door of this mountain preacher's home. Uncle Dave appeared, scratching his head and saying, "Well, son, what can I do for you?"

The young man said with great seriousness, "Uncle Dave, I'm in a heap of trouble and I need your help. They've took out a warrant for me, and I've got to go down to Sylva-town to recorder's court and stand trial at ten o'clock; I was just a-wondering if you could come down and swear me a character?"

Uncle Dave thought a minute and said, "Son, now I'll just be frank with you. You've been mighty good to me. When you killed a deer, you've brought me a good roast; when you've caught fish, you've shared your catch; when you've found a wild honey tree, you've brought me honey; you're not a bad boy, and I want to help you. I tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going down to Sylva to that courthouse, and I'm going to get up on that witness stand, and I'm going to tell the truth just as long as I can; and son, if the occasion calls for it, I'll rise a little."

A WORD FOR IT

This is a "one-liner" that deserves to be included in a collection of mountain stories.

There was a mountain preacher who had not had a college education, but who knew the difference between Baptist doctrine and the narrow teachings that sometimes characterized early radio preachers, and after listening to one of them for awhile, he was heard to observe: "Brethren, that is one ignorant ramus."

THE PULPIT ROBE

This is another story that probably has factual basis.

A small mountain community had brought in several factories and other enterprises, and had prospered. Instead of just one little Baptist church as they'd always had, they now had a

Methodist, a Lutheran, and even an Episcopal church. They decided to have a union service on Easter, and they also made an agreement that the ministers would wear robes.

The old Baptist preacher “didn’t know so much about that.” He had never worn a robe, and he “allowed as how” he wasn’t going to start now, but they talked to him, and after he thought it over, he said, “Oh, well, it won’t do any harm one time. I’ll put one of them things on.”

They all gathered and had a very fine service, and the old mountain preacher participated. When they came out, one of the other ministers said to him, “Now, David, wearing that robe wasn’t too bad. What do you think about it?”

“Well,” David said, “I reckon it’s all right, but just to tell you the truth, pants are warmer.”

THE PREACHER WHO PRESSED HIS LUCK

I first met Monsignor John F. Murphy (Father Jack) when he was executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. In conferences on Christian higher education, with uncanny regularity, we found ourselves in agreement on almost every substantive issue, and formed a lasting friendship. He told me the following story with an Irish Catholic setting. I have adapted it for many of my audiences into a Baptist setting.

It seems that a young mountain preacher was called to become pastor of a small church. He had not even had time to unpack his furniture when an old deacon came to say, “One of our members just died of a heart attack, and the family wants you to hold the funeral service.”

When the time came, the young preacher mounted his pulpit and took his congregation with a great Biblical sermon through the pearly gates, down the streets of gold, right up to the throne of grace. Then he paused a minute and said, “I didn’t know this

brother, and I don't like to put anyone away without having someone say a few kind words. I'm going to stop and give anyone a chance — it doesn't have to be long — a chance to say a good word about this brother."

There was an embarrassing silence. Said the preacher, "I've caught you by surprise. Let's sing one verse of 'Amazing Grace,' and you think about what you're going to say."

The good old mountain congregation dragged out a verse of "Amazing Grace" in close harmony. After they sat down, there was again dead silence. The young preacher finally said with considerable heat, "Well, I can tell you this: we're going to be right here until somebody does say a good word about this brother."

At last, away in the back of the church, an old gray-haired mountaineer held up his hand and in a quavering voice said, "Preacher, his brother were worse!"

MOUNTAIN PREACHER OR SEMINARY GRADUATE

This is a story shared with me by my good friend and former colleague Dr. George Capps, associate secretary of the Education Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

It has to do with a church somewhere in the Smoky Mountains where the congregation had never had a pastor except one whose schooling had been very limited. As has often happened in small communities, the village began to grow and prosper, some small industry moved in, new markets opened up, and many new young members were attending church. When the time came to call a preacher, the pulpit committee was divided on whether to search for a good old mountain preacher such as they had always had, or whether to try to find a seminary graduate.

Because the old pastor had retired and moved away from the community, they had to make the decision on their own initia-

tive. On two separate Sundays they went to hear first an old-time mountain preacher and then a seminary graduate. They had announced that on the third Sunday they would make a recommendation to the church.

One old deacon just couldn't wait. He didn't get out much, and he sent word to the chairman of the search committee to come and see him. "Now, Henry," he said, "you know I can't get to church, and I can't get out to tell nobody. I oughtn't to ask you to do this, but I'm just a-dyin' to know what kind of a preacher you're going to get — and I'll keep it confidential. I'm not in favor of getting one of them new young pastors. I hope you're going to call us a mountain preacher."

The chairman of the committee said, "Deacon, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed, because we thought about it, and prayed about it, and it was unanimous. We decided to call that young seminary graduate."

The old man thought a minute and said, "I hope you know what you're doing. He must be a powerful preacher."

The chairman said, "No, sir. We're not calling him on his preaching. We're calling him on his praying."

"What do you mean — 'calling him on his praying'?"

The chairman said, "Let me tell you something: when that young preacher prayed, he was asking God for things that old preacher didn't even know He had."

THE BATHROBE

This is an old story that I believe came out of the red clay hills of north Georgia and made its way into North Carolina and into Jackson and Swain counties.

It seems that back during the Depression, a family was trying to scratch out a living on a little hard, red-clay farm, and

things weren't going too well. The oldest boy decided he was going to have to do something about the situation, so he went to Detroit (he didn't go to *Detroit*; he went to *Deetroit*; everybody went to *Deetroit* looking for work). He lucked into a job that paid him twenty-five dollars a week. When Southern cotton mills were paying about six or seven dollars a week, this was a real bonanza. He didn't know there was that much money in the entire world.

He had great love for his grandmother, who was up in her eighties, so he went to the store and bought her a beautiful knit bathrobe with three panels, in three different colors: green, red, and white. He bundled up this bathrobe and sent it to his grandmother, who opened it, put it on, and liked it so much that she wore it to church on Sunday morning.

Some of the ladies that had traveled a little and were a bit more sophisticated recognized it for what it was. They were giggling and making remarks behind Granny's back, and she knew something was wrong. After the service, one of the good ladies went up and said, "Granny, don't you know what you've got on? That's a bathrobe. Why in the world would you wear a bathrobe to church?"

"Well," she said, "Sadie, you always did have a mean tongue. I'll just tell you why I wore this bathrobe to church. In the first place, it's the prettiest thing I ever had in my life; and in the second place, my grandson sent it to me, and I love him dearly. And," she added, "in the third place, I love my Lord, and I wore it for the glory of God. Besides," she said, "I ain't got no bathroom, and you ain't neither."

I FRENZIED

This is a story which comes out of my own experience of being a pastor. I was invited to supply in a mill church in the foothills of the mountains of western North Carolina. The church was

having some difficulty in keeping a pastor. They wished me to come and serve with them awhile, preach doctrinal sermons, and try to help them to develop a better fellowship.

One of the first things I discovered when I went into the community was that there were five or six ordained ministers who were members of the congregation. These men had migrated, mostly from the mountains, to find employment in the cotton mills. There was a considerable amount of jealousy about who would be called upon to lead in prayer, teach a Sunday School class, or perform any other duty in the church.

I had not been there too long when the church voted to establish a mission. We had one member-preacher whom we shall call Adams, who had had some difficulty in his last church. As a matter of fact, he had been asked to leave the church because he had used some intemperate and rather crude language in the pulpit. The chairman of the board of deacons came to me and said, "Preacher, we want you to talk to Brother Adams. He is dying to preach, and we believe he can serve this church at the mission if he can promise not to use that kind of language in the pulpit."

I agreed to talk to him, so on the following Sunday after church, he came around to the study and I just put it on the line. I said, "Now, Brother Adams, the congregation wants you to preach, but you remember that in the last church you got to saying a lot of ugly things about women and the way they dress, and the language you used was pretty harsh, and you know what the result was."

He said, "Yes, Brother Fisher, the devil got a hold of me," and he continued, "You just give me a chance to preach, and I won't ever do that sort of thing again."

As a result, he went ahead and accepted the little church. About four or five weeks later on a Monday morning Brother Adams came, passed right by my secretary, burst into my office and said, "Brother Fisher, they've fired me. Can they do that?"

I said, "Brother Adams, sit down and tell me about it."

"Well, they fired me," he said. "I didn't know a mission church could fire their preacher. I thought that would be up to the parent-church."

"Well," I said, "I don't know. I'll have to look into that. But there must have been some reason. Now suppose you sit down and tell me what you preached on." It turned out that he had become excited again, and he had used some very strong language in regard to the way women dress. He had specified short skirts, lipstick, etc., and what he had said was unbelievably crude and vulgar. "Brother Adams," I said, "you know we talked about this, and you promised that you would not do this again. What happened?"

"Brother Fisher," he said, "I'll just be frank with you. I was preaching one of my best sermons. I really had the congregation with me, and the more I preached, the more they got to Amen-ing me, and Brother Fisher, when you Amen me," he said, "you just as well sic a bulldog on a heifer. To tell you the truth, I just frenzied."

CUSSIN'

A young and eager preacher, walking the mountain roads to visit his congregation, came upon one of his members who was plowing new ground. The air was blue with his expletives, and the young preacher was shocked. He begged his church member to control both his language and his wrath, whereupon the farmer said, "You want to plow this row? Help yourself."

The preacher picked up the challenge and started down the row. The ground was uneven, and he stumbled along, zig-zagging as he went, and getting his breeches covered with red clay. The plow struck a rock and nearly threw him. The mule balked, but finally was induced to go on. When the preacher finished the row, sweating and dirty, he threw the lines over the hames, and walked back to where the farmer was still standing.

Wiping his brow, he said, "Son, you'll just have to do the best you can, and not cuss any more than you have to."

CLIMBING AN OAK TREE

This story was a favorite of a good old mountain preacher friend of mine, who was quite a philosopher. He used it as a sermon illustration.

A mountain congregation had had some experiences in the Depression that made them very cautious about going into debt. They needed to add some Sunday School rooms and put a steeple and a bell on the church, but they had agreed that they wouldn't start until they had enough money to pay for the whole job. They were quite proud of the money they had already raised, but the last of it was slow coming in, and they were becoming discouraged.

Their preacher said, "Well, I can tell you, brethren, it's time to roll up our sleeves. You know, there are just two ways to climb an oak tree. You can wrap your arms and legs around that rough, scaly bark, and work at it; and when you get to the top, you may have lost a little of your hide, but the view will be pretty, and you'll be proud you're up there.

"Or," he said, "you can plant an acorn and sit on it."

THE SHREWISH WOMAN

There was in a little mountain community a woman who had spent a lifetime making things miserable for everybody. She criticized the pastor, the deacons, and the choir, and gave her neighbors a piece of her mind when it suited her. She was especially vocal in church conferences and had kept everyone in turmoil for about forty years. She didn't like what the Woman's

Missionary Union was doing; she didn't approve of the people who led the Training Union programs; and she thought the Sunday School superintendent was something less than perfect. The pastor, she hinted, worked none too hard.

A new young preacher had been on the field just a few days when this dear lady suffered a fatal heart attack. He had not been there long enough to know about her, and he preached a glowing sermon. The crowd made its way to the little mountain cemetery, and as they were lowering the casket into the grave, a huge cloud was hanging over the mountains. Suddenly, there was a great roll of thunder, and lightning split the sky. One of the old deacons looked up and said, "Fellers, she's there."

RIDING SHOTGUN

While I was visiting our son Hugh, his wife, Serena, and our granddaughter Elizabeth, I rode along one Saturday morning to a shopping center where Serena wanted to get some groceries.

I elected to stay in the back seat of the car, and six-year-old Elizabeth stayed with me. "What shall we do, Elizabeth?" I asked.

"Let's play stagecoach, Granddaddy."

"Good," I replied. "How shall we do it?"

"I'll drive," she said, moving over under the wheel, "and you ride shotgun."

I had a gnarled cane made by a friend years ago from the new growth of a beech stump in Maine. It had dried to an inordinate strength, and had a natural knob at one end. I was firing away from the car window with this cane as my gun, uttering loud cries of "Pow! Pow!" and not noticing that Elizabeth, in embarrassment, had slid down in the driver's seat to a point where no one could see her.

"Myrt!" shouted a passing shopper to his wife. "Come here. This ya gotta see!"

In mountaineer fashion, I made as if to cock the cane—with a suitable click, aimed straight at him, and reached for the imaginary trigger. He took off, and as far as I know, he is still running.

THE LOST SHEEP

This concerns an incident in connection with my first revival, which I held at Perry's Chapel, Franklinton, North Carolina, in August of 1938. I had taken as my text the parable of the lost sheep, and (I thought) was exhorting in no mean measure. From time to time I observed an old gentleman in the last pew in the church. He seemed to be drinking in my words, and I noted too that when I mentioned in an illustration that my home was in western North Carolina, he seemed somewhat excited.

I was very much elated and felt sure I had led some lost soul to the throne of grace; and sure enough, as soon as the service was over, the old man sent one of his boys for me and said that it was urgent that I see him. I made my way hastily to the back of the church and gripped the old man's hand. He looked at me a moment and then with nasal twang made the following statement: "Son, hain't you from up in the mountains? Shore did preach a powerful sermon. I just happen to recollect, being as you was speaking of sheep, that my ram died last month, and I thought you might know someone in Haywood county that would sell me a pure-bred Hampshire ram."

CREASYBACK BEANS

This story happened to me.

The Haywood Association was meeting in a little church in

what is known as the Cowee section. There are some log houses there, built long before the Civil War, that people still live in. It was one of those beautiful cool October days in the mountains, and I was with my good friend and cousin Weston Reid, and a preacher by the name of Sawyer — a man about my size and a good trencherman.

When we went out to have “dinner on the grounds,” I noticed a dear old lady in a faded blue dress and black shoes and stockings. She wore a poke bonnet such as I hadn’t seen in years. She hesitated a little before unpacking her old pasteboard box, then shyly set an old-fashioned iron pot on the table, and something wrapped up in a white towel. I alerted Reid and Sawyer, because I knew there’d be something worth looking into in that pot, so — being experienced — we didn’t go in with the first two or three waves.

For people these days who have never attended a mountain association, it is a feast-time. There is nothing in the European festivals that will equal the table that is set out in the yard, with every kind of meat and vegetable you can think of, and pies, cookies, cakes, and desserts of all kinds made by everyone’s best recipe, and tea and coffee and milk to drink.

When we went over and took the lid off that little iron pot, we found it full of creasyback beans. A creasyback is a bean somewhat like a Kentucky Wonder. These had evidently been the last “mess” on the vines, because about half the beans were shelled out (these are called “shellie” beans). They’d been cooked with a large piece of salt pork (the kind called streak-of-fat-and-streak-of-lean). And in the white towel was a big “dodger” of cornbread. Since nobody seemed to mind, we put that iron pot down where we could reach it, and found some vine-ripened tomatoes and some onions and hot pepper; and “amongst us,” as they say in the mountains, we cleaned up those creasyback beans. I hadn’t eaten any like that in years. They were delicious.

We went back into the church for the afternoon service, and when my time came to address the association, I spotted that dear little lady in the back of the church. I began by saying,

"Lady, I don't want to embarrass you, but I want to tell you that I just had the best dinner I've had in a long time. Those creasyback beans and that cornbread you brought were absolutely delicious. If I could just have found some buttermilk, everything would have been perfect."

She beamed, and the congregation smiled too.

Just about a year from that date, the three of us — Reid, Sawyer, and I — happened to be back at the same association, meeting in a different church, to represent our various institutions and agencies. We were standing under a big oak tree, waiting for the crowd to thin out a little bit before we went up to the table.

I felt someone tug at my coat sleeve, and though I didn't recognize her for a minute, there stood the dear old lady in her same little poke bonnet. She was holding the iron pot, and a jug with a cob for a stopper. She said, "Ain't you the preacher that likes creasyback beans? This time I brung your buttermilk."

A TRUE BAPTIST

This story is told in connection with the early days of Carson-Newman College, which was being operated not too long after the Civil War, not as a college but as a Baptist orphanage.

The head of the orphanage was a mountain preacher. He had been out several weeks riding his mare back in those mountain coves and hollows, collecting money to support the children during the winter. He had started home and was just coming down Roan Mountain. He reached a spot where he could see the blue smoke coming up from the kitchen fire at his home, and he could almost smell the bacon frying and the cornbread cooking. He was thinking how good it would be to get home and see all of his children again, when his dreams were rudely interrupted. A grizzled mountaineer stepped out from behind a bush and put a muzzle-loading rifle against his stomach. The old

mountaineer said, "Friend, stand and deliver. I want your money, or I want your life."

"No use to get excited," said the preacher. "You can have the money. I'm offering no resistance, so just don't be nervous. I've got three hundred dollars here," he continued, "silver dollars, in these saddlebags. You go ahead and take this money, but if you do, I just want you to know one thing: there'll be some little young 'uns down there at that Baptist orphanage that are going to go cold and hungry this winter. If that's what you want, you're welcome to the money."

The old mountaineer looked at the preacher a moment, uncocked his gun, put it down by his side, crooked his arm around it, reached down in his pants pocket and pulled out another silver dollar. He said, "Here, preacher, take this silver dollar and put it with the rest. I wouldn't touch that money. I'm a Baptist myself."

BEN: THE MAN BEHIND THE STORIES

by

Roger G. Branch

Ben Fisher was a story-teller. His skill was an abiding legacy from his mountain culture. Mountain people, typical of most folk societies, use story-telling both for recreation and as an intellectual tool for abstract reasoning, treating one vivid life experience as an analog for wider applications. Capable of squeezing a laugh out of life if anyone could, Ben often told stories just for the fun of it. But he also understood thoroughly the power of a well-crafted story to make a point that stimulates thought and sticks in the memory. So his stories usually had a didactic function, artfully influencing his world and making it better.

When Ben died on November 3, 1985, he left incomplete a task long urged upon him by friends — the task of capturing on paper the mountain tales for which he had become famous. He had begun. Some were in manuscript form in various stages of polish, and he had recorded others on tapes. His wife, Sally, has transcribed these and edited the entire collection in her determination to finish this project that he had launched before cancer slowly dragged him away from his manifold ministries. These are not all of his stories, but they offer a representative sample of his treasury.

At the time of Ben's death, one of his former students, Dr. R. F. Smith, Jr., wrote in his church bulletin, "Most of you don't know Ben. But you need to." Knowing him makes the stories more meaningful. This chapter is intended to be an introduction to Ben — only that, because you had to be with him awhile, hear

his stories, touch his mind, observe his victories over suffering, and feel his love to begin to know him.

Benjamin Coleman Fisher was born May 27, 1915, at Webster, North Carolina. His parents were Ben F. and Amy Long Fisher, and his forefathers were pioneer mountain settlers. The world of his childhood was still characterized by such pioneer attributes as economic self-sufficiency, strong family ties, neighborliness, a sense of community, love of the land, and religion — ardent, evangelical Christianity — as ever-present as the mountains. That world became a part of the man, profoundly shaping his character and values although he lived much of his life beyond its cradling hills and valleys.

The pioneer heritage was a source of deep satisfaction to Ben. A prized possession was a gavel fashioned from the original, hand-made pulpit of Scott's Creek Baptist Church. Ben's great-grandfather, Humphrey Posey, had established this and many other churches as a pioneer preacher in the mountains of the Carolinas and Georgia. Ben was particularly proud of two things about "Grandpa Posey." First, he was among those who resisted the shameful removal of the Cherokees and Creeks from their lands to Oklahoma. Second, this ardent mountain preacher was well educated, having studied classical Latin and Greek from books his mother had brought when the family migrated from Virginia. Ben, his descendant, hated the "ignorant hill-billy" stereotype of mountain people. He also believed with every fiber of his being in an educated ministry and in Christian education generally. To that cause he gave a lifetime of faithful, innovative service.

Ben's childhood was a rich sampler of some of the best of the rural South, a world largely defined by kinship and the land. In an autobiographical article in the *Historic Webster* newsletter, Ben said, "When I was still a baby, my mother and father went to live with Uncle Wibb and Aunt Mollie Fisher on what is now the Swayngim farm. Since Uncle Wibb and Aunt Mollie had reared my mother, they were more like grandparents." The social fabric of his childhood was a densely woven network of

extended family relationships. More often than not, those who touched his life in the community, church, or school were kin. He attended the Webster school with his brother Wibb and sister Marian, his mother's younger sister and brother, and numerous cousins who were not only family but also best friends. Forever afterward Ben's conversations were sprinkled with accounts of boyhood adventures and misadventures with these kinsmen. He lived in a land of many aunts, uncles, and cousins. The aunts were a pervasive, loving influence throughout his life; the uncles told him stories of the War Between the States; and the cousins (notably Mack Hall) fed him green persimmons and otherwise evoked images of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.

Among the boyhood companions most frequently mentioned in Ben's accounts of growing up in the mountains were two cousins named David. One was David Hall, who became a U. S. Congressman from North Carolina. The other was David H. Brown, who became an engineer and rose through the management ranks of Chrysler Corporation to the position of head of its Australia and Far East Division. One family in one small community produced these three — a national leader in Christian higher education, a Congressman, and a corporate executive. The tales of their youthful adventures are human slices of rural America, but these men shatter the "backward hillbilly" stereotype.

Great folk story tellers always have strong links to the past. Ben learned many of his stories and the art of telling them from his maternal grandmother, Florence Long Cagle. Even her homesite was steeped in history, a rambling two-story house located in the Muster-ground Hollow where troops had drilled before marching away to the Civil War. As Ben recalled his experiences, "I spent many a pleasant hour there. Granny Florence was a great story-teller."

Ben Coleman, as he was called by kin and neighbors to distinguish him from his father, also named Ben, grew up as boys do. And how he grew! As an adult, the man from the mountains was a mountain of a man — six feet three inches tall and ranging

in weight through the years from about 250 to almost 300 pounds. He once described his running gait as a teen-ager with the word "lumbering." However, his huge hands were deft in such diverse skills as photography, playing a guitar, and electrical work.

As young Ben Coleman grew in stature, he also grew in knowledge. His lifelong love of learning was born where his education began, in a small community school. Read his tribute to that school:

My early schooling was in the old Webster school, where sometimes three grades were taught in one room, and where at one time the library consisted of two shelves which held a Webster's dictionary and a King James Bible. But I want to say that although since that time it has been my privilege to attend some excellent schools and to visit and study at some great universities at home and abroad, the moral influence of the Christian men and women who taught in that little, old-fashioned Webster school has made a lasting mark on my life and my career. I don't know of a single teacher at that time who had had the kind of teacher training that is required today, but I remember one teacher particularly who repeated often to her classes: "No real man or woman would lie, cheat, or steal. Let your word be your bond. Pay your just and honest debts, and be beholden to no man. Make something out of yourself. Go to college if you can." Those instructors also taught us how to spell, how to read, and how to do basic math. These were great teachers because, as far as I know, without exception they wanted to leave a better world than they had found and to provide for young people a better chance than they had had.

While Ben took these lessons to heart, the admonition to go to college presented a major challenge. First it was necessary to journey across the mountains to Fruitland Institute, a Baptist academy established to provide secondary education for mountain children. By the time he completed his high school requirements there in 1933, he had been licensed to preach. Determined to secure the best preparation possible for ministry, he gathered his courage and his scant resources to go to Wake Forest College.

In the middle of the Great Depression that was a long journey of faith, and necessitated one year out to work and save. In the years that followed he was unfailingly sympathetic to students in financial distress. He was able to remain at Wake Forest College, which bestowed upon him the A.B. degree *cum laude* in 1938. In 1971 the school honored its distinguished alumnus by conferring upon him the Doctor of Divinity degree.

After serving the Castalia and Peachtree churches as pastor in 1938-39, Ben followed up on his conviction of the need for further preparation for ministry by enrolling in Andover-Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. He received his Master of Divinity degree in 1942.

The sojourn in the North was an enriching experience for this young man from the hills. He received an excellent education and exposure to a new culture. Before he returned from seminary, he married Sara (Sally) Gehman, of "Pennsylvania Dutch" heritage; their sons were David Lincoln, born in 1942 in Boston, and Hugh Robert, born in 1944 after they had returned to North Carolina.

There was a bit of the "Br'er Rabbit" trickster in Ben. He told his new bride that he was "used to having fresh, hot biscuits every morning for breakfast." He continued, "Well, I got right ashamed of myself watching that sweet little girl get up to make my biscuits on those cold, dark winter mornings in New England. After a few weeks one of my cousins who was in the area paid us a visit, and she quickly set Sally straight about my custom, or lack of it, of having hot bread every morning for breakfast. It was a while before I saw another biscuit."

A special treasure from Ben's days at Andover-Newton was a profound knowledge of and appreciation for the great New England writers. In later years one of his favorite activities was to teach college-level courses on this subject when he found opportunity to do so.

The Fishers returned to North Carolina in 1942 to the pastoral ministry. Ben was pastor of First Baptist Church,

Nashville, 1942-45, and First Baptist Church, Newton, 1945-47, before entering the field of Christian higher education, which thereafter dominated his life. Moving to Gardner-Webb College, he served as chairman of the English department, 1947-48, and executive assistant to the president and director of public relations, 1948-52.

After serving with the Education Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and with the Baptist colleges of Kentucky, 1952-54, Ben returned to North Carolina to join the staff of the dynamic new seminary that was being created on the old campus of his beloved Wake Forest College. He was administrative assistant to "Doc" Stealey and director of public relations and professor of Christian Education at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1954-62. He joyously plunged into the new school's heady, idealistic mixture of emphases: prophetic involvement, academic excellence, intellectual freedom, and commitment to world missions. And, for a season, it truly was Camelot.

Even as he played an amazing variety of roles, he also made important contributions to the world of ideas. He helped to restructure public relations, away from practices bordering upon manipulation and deception, and toward sensitivity to public interests and honesty in reporting. He thought through the role of the college trustee and published his practical conclusions in *A Manual for College Trustees*. These were fruitful years.

For the next move the Fishers remained in their home in Rolesville while Ben changed his daily commute from Wake Forest to Raleigh. He became executive secretary of the Council on Christian Higher Education, Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, 1962-70. He served effectively as liaison person between the seven colleges supported by North Carolina Baptists and the denomination. It was far from an easy task. Southern Baptists have typically been ambivalent toward higher education. The rural and frontier heritage is intolerant of anything that smacks of elitism. Moreover, the colleges have

often served as a highly visible, convenient, and virtually defenseless target for malcontents and power-seekers. Ben went far beyond the role of trouble-shooter and peace-maker; he so interpreted higher education to North Carolina Baptists that the colleges came to have strong advocates in most Baptist churches "from Manteo to Murphy."

It was during this period also that at the request of Governor Dan K. Moore, Ben served on the "Speaker Ban Commission," which was able to defuse the controversial issue of limiting choice of speakers on state college and university campuses. This was the era of the governance crisis in all of higher education, and it is a measure of Ben's expertise that the state Board of Education commissioned him to write a special report on duties and responsibilities of college and university trustees, used as the basis for Chapter V in the major study called *Planning for Higher Education in North Carolina* (1968).

In 1970 Ben was chosen for the highest leadership position in Baptist higher education: executive director-treasurer of the Education Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. He held that office until his retirement in 1978. He applied effectively the wisdom gained during his near quarter of a century of experience in Baptist higher education. In addition to his direct involvement with Baptist colleges and the denomination, he continued to write extensively. He also worked hard to help other denominational groups improve their colleges and universities. He campaigned for cooperative efforts to strengthen all Christian higher education, as is evidenced by his service as chairman of the Secretariat of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, 1978-79.

Ben Fisher was an unblinking advocate for private church-related colleges and universities. They had nurtured his mind and soul. More importantly, however, he believed that America needs a strong dual system of higher education — public and private institutions. In his view both are required to meet the varied educational needs of a diverse people because they supplement and complement one another. No doubt one of the most

satisfying events of his very eventful career came in December 1977, when he organized and led a White House Conference between President Jimmy Carter and chief executives of 22 boards of church-related higher education.

Retirement mostly meant a change of address for the Fishers. They moved to Murfreesboro, N. C., home of Chowan College, where long-time friend Bruce Whitaker was the president. They were home, but hardly retired. Ben was named adjunct professor of religion and educational consultant to Norman A. Wiggins, president of Campbell University. He served actively on many advisory boards and councils. He continued to write. He excitedly made plans to go to Rüschlikon, Switzerland, to study for a time at the Baptist Theological Seminary there. At the invitation of Dafydd Davies, he gave the introductory lecture of the centenary celebration of University College Cardiff in Wales. He arranged for Dr. Davies and Harry Blamires to give lectures in the United States. He sailed his beloved boat, the *Sara G.*, and found life to be full.

However, dreams of a long, satisfying period of semi-retirement soon were smashed. Stricken by cancer, Ben began a long battle using surgery and various forms of treatment to stretch his time to the fullest. He did not stop doing what he wanted to do. He did go to Rüschlikon, and other places as well. He surrendered treasured activities grudgingly, and only as deteriorating strength left no alternative. Eventually, the Fishers moved to Raleigh to be closer to specialized medical care. He continued to write — and to tell stories, even about the deadly enemy that was taking his life. Through the years he would occasionally threaten a friend with a reference to his great size, saying, "If you don't treat me with more respect, I'm going to provide in my will that you must serve as one of my pall bearers."

The list of public honors bestowed upon Ben for his many ministries is far too lengthy even to sample. They range from local citations to national, even international, recognition. Being human, he appreciated them; being Ben, he didn't let them turn his head. Crate Jones, Ben's friend and former pastor, wrote

about his inherent humility in an article in the *Biblical Recorder*:

His "take the lower seat" attitude was matter-of-factly revealed one day. He was to give the baccalaureate address at an important university. "They are going to give me another degree." Sound like bragging? But wait. The Big Ben rang as true as Westminster's famed one when he added, "I don't need it; I'd rather have two dozen ears of sweet corn."

Maybe Ben wouldn't actually have swapped one of his five honorary doctoral degrees for two dozen ears of sweet corn, but he was secure in his sense of self-worth. And he did like fresh sweet corn.

Like everyone else who knew Ben Fisher well, I have a personal store of rich experiences. All of us want to say, "Let me tell you about . . ." So, let me tell you about Ben.

My wife Annette and I arrived in Wake Forest in early August of 1956 in a state of youthful optimism, innocent faith, and abject poverty. Our total assets were our personal belongings, a tiny (and leaky) house trailer, and \$20 beyond what I would need for fees to begin my theological education. Our plan for survival was blind faith and the hope that someone named Ben Fisher could use my degree and experience in journalism.

With my ratty little trailer settled in, I trudged halfway across Wake Forest to the "old music building" which had been the home of Southeastern Seminary during the years of joint occupancy of the campus with the recently removed Wake Forest College. At the foot of the steps a student identified himself as Randall Lolley and responded to my inquiry that Ben Fisher was on the premises. "I was talking to him just a second ago in the hall," he said. "You'll find him right inside, and you can't miss him. He has a 'lean and hungry look.'" Why that mountain of a man ever hired a scrawny kid from South Georgia with his mouth wide open and his eyes bugged out in shock remains something of a mystery. Life with Ben began with a joke on me, and it was far from the last. Even as I prepared to leave the

seminary after completing the B.D. and course requirements for the Th.M., Ben had a parting thrust, the last of many teasing references to the backwardness of my native state. He said to President Stealey, "Yeah, Doc, we're sending Branch out as a missionary — to Georgia."

Although Ben showed little reluctance in unleashing his humor upon me and other friends, he did not use it to inflict hurt as many do. More often than not he made himself the butt of many funny stories. In fact, they often were true accounts, and his willingness to share his misadventures and embarrassments revealed a rare openness to others. He invited us to laugh with him at himself — a sign of being at ease with self and everyone else.

Ben was not a plaster saint. Some of his humor was too country-boy earthy for his after-dinner speeches — a thing shared with close associates only, and such it will remain. He also had a towering temper. Once it exploded upon a new student assistant in the darkroom, who had decided to clean up the place, even scouring the surface of the print dryer with gritty household cleanser. The shiny drum of the expensive dryer was terribly scratched, and Ben found many ways to describe the assistant's incompetence before his anger cooled.

Another young man who earned Ben's wrath was one I call "the evangelist." Part of my job was to write graduation stories on all persons completing degrees. With accompanying photos these were sent to students' hometown newspapers. It was a nice touch for students, and good public relations for the seminary. Before the stories were mailed, we asked the students to come by briefly to check for accuracy or to suggest changes. One student, known for "getting results" as an evangelistic preacher (and by his demeanor obviously aware of his importance to the Kingdom of God), found himself too busy to come by our offices in spite of several messages from me. Not long before graduation I mentioned the situation to Ben, and "it struck him wrong." He set off toward the cafeteria where the student was taking part in some pregraduation festivities. He reminded me of Casey Jones'

freight train on the long down-grade to the cafeteria. I did not go along to witness the event and wish that I had. I know only that the young man was in my office almost immediately, and he was contrite, cooperative, and curiously humble.

I remember Ben most for his compassion. Annette and I both worked for the seminary for the sub-minimum wage that all institutions paid in those days. Ben once said, "Roger, you can make as much per hour as you like but I have only \$150 a month for you, and we have to work as many hours as it takes to get the job done." It was not exploitive. We worked together, he longer than anyone. Always living at the edge of need, we Branches found our situation even more precarious when our son Gary was born during our second year at Southeastern. Ben was alert for little grants-in-aid, and helped me find loans when things got too tough. He also brought us food from his pantry and freezer. Since he was supporting a wife, two hearty teen-age sons, and his father on a limited salary, I know that every one of those gifts was a sacrifice.

The Branches also ate some meals in the Fisher home, where Sally and Ben both cooked. Our first was a dinner meal built around a big roast. After the blessing, older son David asked, "Dad, FDI or FHB?" Ben seemed taken aback briefly, then relaxed and said, "FDI, boys, FDI." Then he explained, "We have this code that we use when we have company. If the food's a little short, it's FHB: Family Hold Back. If there's plenty, it's FDI: Family Dig In." Ben and his father gardened, and Sally managed. I never saw any evidence of hunger. So I think that the FDI-FHB business was a joke, probably on me, but I guess I'll never know for sure.

Visits to the Fisher home let us get to know Sally; their mutual devotion was obvious. Ben once explained, "Sally and I have an agreement. If she decides to leave me, I am going with her." She remained his emotional, spiritual, and intellectual partner to the end and beyond.

Three years as a pastor and a teacher in a Baptist college in Georgia ended with my return to North Carolina in 1963 as

associate editor of the *Biblical Recorder*. Ben was a member of the paper's board of directors and influenced my decision to accept the position. By then he was with the Council on Christian Higher Education. His close relationship with editor Marse Grant made us all co-laborers in the cause of Baptist higher education. Always a mentor and friend, he now became my colleague.

Looking back over the years, more than 30 of them, I realize that Ben was often misunderstood and inadequately appreciated. Some people heard his stories and thought they were funny but missed the underlying message. Some may even have judged him to be an intellectual light-weight because he told humorous stories. Inability to perceive the several layers of meaning in his messages led such folk astray. In fact, his intellectual interests were broad, and his vision was acute. If he often used country boys' way of speaking, he was no less a world citizen, at ease almost anywhere.

Ben was a peacemaker, a mediator. Such people are sometimes seen as lacking courage or convictions. In the sometimes fractious relationships between Baptist colleges and their critics within the denomination, he filled an indispensable role for decades. He had to struggle to control that thunderous temper because he had strong convictions and attendant emotions. Sometimes patience takes more character than taking a dramatic stand. Yes, he had convictions. On the day that the trustees of Southeastern Seminary voted officially to drop all racial bars to admission, I watched him write a straightforward news release announcing the decision. He pounded it out himself on his battered typewriter. When he finished, he said softly, "At last!"

Once one of my friends at Southeastern said, "Your friend Ben Fisher can be downright rude. I'm in his class but I met him on campus today and spoke to him, and he acted as if he didn't see me." My response was, "He *didn't* see you, and what's more he does the same thing to me." Ben's power of concentration was phenomenal. When he started "chewing" on an idea or problem

mentally, other things faded to the periphery of his attention. Thus, his apparent occasional aloofness was an unfortunate by-product of one of his great strengths.

Ben Fisher's service to the cause of Christian higher education was profoundly significant. It crossed denominational, regional, and national boundaries. Character traits and values nurtured in a mountain family and community reached out to the world through him. Because his cause was education, his contributions will continue. We should not forget that he made them.

One of the educators who spoke at Ben's funeral was Monsignor John F. Murphy, who — as head of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities — had worked closely with Ben in national organizations and programs for Christian higher education. He began his remarks by saying, "That which we miss most today at this celebration is Ben's voice telling us a story for the occasion."

We shall continue to miss Ben's voice telling his stories. But if you ever heard him and if you read carefully his stories in this book, you may think that you still catch echoes of his robust tones.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

BEN FISHER was a native of Webster, North Carolina. He attended both Wake Forest University and Andover Newton Theological School in Newton Center in Massachusetts. He held several prominent positions as a long standing member of the Southern Baptist Convention. He taught at Gardner Webb University and Liberty University. He published a number of scholarly works including, *New Pathways: A Dialogue in Christian Higher Education* and *The Idea of a Christian University in Today's World*. He passed away in November of 1985.

SALLY FISHER was the wife of Ben C. Fisher. She kept minutes on all of the speeches he gave, took notes on conversations that they had regarding Christian education and all things that Ben held dear. Following Ben's passing, Sally put those notes together, the stories told in this book.